



Teaching in the Terrordome

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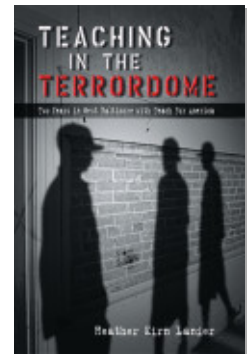
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CHAPTER 2

TEACHER BOOT CAMP

Should you decide to become a Teach For America teacher—should you decide, that is, to throw yourself without any teaching experience into one of the nation’s toughest rural or urban schools and vow to work relentlessly for its improvement—you’ll hear plenty of dissenting voices. You’ll read them in newspaper commentaries and from education critics, and maybe you’ll hear them from friends.

“Just don’t park your car in the same spot twice,” one friend said to me, thinking he was offering advice.

I told my mother about the latent racism in the comment—*He assumes inner-city kids key cars*—but she only bit her bottom lip and said softly, “Heath, that’s not such a bad idea.”

After I bought a small collection of new pants, skirts, and blouses for my new job, another friend asked, “Why would you buy new clothes?” He added, as though my tan skirt would get soiled beyond repair in the classroom, “Baltimore’s a dirty, *dirty* city.” He didn’t mean that soot filled the Charm City air, that a person couldn’t walk from A to B without attracting unbearable stains. He meant my future students wouldn’t appreciate—maybe didn’t deserve—a teacher who wore an Ann Taylor silk-blend V-neck blouse.

When I told a thirtysomething teacher friend of mine that TFA was supposed to cover, in five weeks, all the training I needed to succeed in the city classroom, he burst into a hearty, alienating laugh. Then he asked, “Do you even know how to write a lesson plan?” to which I just shook my head.

“But it can’t be *that* hard,” I said.

He laughed again and added a sardonic “Good luck.”

And as I finally headed to Houston, Texas, for my five weeks of summer training, the man beside me on the plane nudged my elbow with his, asked what I did for a living. I told him that soon I’d teach in Baltimore.

“Baltimore *County*?” he asked hopefully, his eyebrows raised, his thick fingers dipping into a salty aluminum bag of nuts.

"City," I told him, and he grimaced. "Would have been better if it'd been Baltimore County, huh?" He chuckled, and his belly jiggled against his opened tray table, and I thought he was about to nudge me again.

When I landed in Houston, the airport was filled with a disproportionate number of youthful, neatly dressed college-age people (mostly female, mostly white). They walked quickly and with purpose to luggage conveyor belts, grabbed their bags, and followed the signs that read *Teach For America*. They walked, I thought, like they were used to charting successful paths through the world.

I grabbed my luggage and rolled it toward the signs. I didn't know what we were in for. I only knew that my insides weren't nearly as self-assured as the others' outsides. But the months of dissenting voices were a strange, ironic form of encouragement. *Nobody can teach those kids*, I'd heard again and again, all from suburban white folks who had no idea.

We were told this five-week "Institute" would be akin to military training, minus the physical excursion. We were told to expect grueling, eighteen-hour days, mental, physical, and emotional exhaustion, and no time for rest or relaxation. But mostly, we were just told it would be "really really hard." Like "teacher boot camp." The organization's thousand new teachers had flown from around the country to train, without pay, at the University of Houston. On the first evening, we gathered in the auditorium for the Institute's "Opening Ceremonies." A huge TEACH FOR AMERICA banner hung above an empty stage. We settled, row by row, into the auditorium's seats. I scanned the room and saw that, while a disproportionate number of us were indeed white and female, we were still a fairly diverse group: male and female, Latino, African American, Asian American. Some of us were dressed in button-up shirts and ties, or blouses and business skirts. Others looked like they'd walked right off a college campus in their T-shirts and shorts and flip-flops.

The chatter of the auditorium died down when a white woman in a tan pants-suit walked across the stage. She had straight, mid-length, sandy brown hair. As she approached the podium, I checked her shoes. Soft, sensible flats. This seemed meaningful. I'd brought nothing but heels I'd never worn before.

Once she introduced herself as Wendy Kopp, the audience went wild. They hooted, they whistled, they cheered, all the while pounding their hands together with a force that sounded storm-like. So this was the founder of TFA. And though I joined in the cheering, I had to ask myself why. Why were we all so ballistic? Maybe we were celebrating our collective company, the knowledge that the one-thousand voices surrounding us would finally offer optimistic words rather than nay-saying ones. Maybe we were relieved to begin the road that even the most courageous of us

still undoubtedly worried about. Maybe if you collect a thousand earnest, high-achieving twentysomethings into a room, and you tell them they can improve the nation's greatest injustice, despite the fact that they've been raised on heavy doses of irony and sarcasm, they'll make a lot of noise.

"This is truly my favorite part of the job," Kopp said in a soothing, even-paced voice. "Opening Ceremonies. This is when you're still *thanking* me instead of *blaming* me."

The audience laughed—aware of both our present naïveté and our impending difficulties. We thousand or so had a sense of humor. But her comment was also a warning: in only a few weeks, we wouldn't respond so jubilantly to her presence.

After Kopp's remarks—about the national crisis, about our importance, about the fact that we should never, ever quit—eight or so TFA alumni lined the stage. Stoically, they stood, their faces cast down, their hands clasped behind their backs. They looked like an un-singing chorus-line of serious young teachers. The audience hushed and waited. A guy named Brian, a tall white guy with a Ken-doll poof of hair, stepped forward into the stage's lone spotlight. In a slight southern drawl, he began a story of what seemed like total failure.

Every day, Davon and Marcus mess around. They talk in class. They don't do their work. Every day, Brian assigns Davon and Marcus detention, but they don't care. They still act out. How can Brian get through to them?

Brian stepped back in line, and the next teacher stepped forward. Right down the line, each teacher delivered the beginnings of a story that seemed unsolvable. Another problem kid. A group of resistant readers. The spotlight returned to Brian.

Detention time, and once again he sits with Davon and Marcus. Marcus flicks his pencil across the room. Davon snickers. Brian levels with them. They're two of the smartest kids in class. They could choose to do better. Why don't they choose to *do better*? Marcus turns to Davon and says, "Yeah man, we should quit messing." But would their behavior improve the next day? Brian didn't know.

Brian stepped back in line again, his plot sufficiently thickened, and another teacher stepped forward to bring us to her climax. On and on went the storytellers until the audience was left at the peaks of eight or so suspenseful teacher-tales. How would they all end? Would these teachers succeed?

Brian continued. The next day, Davon and Marcus sit at their desks, bring out their pencils, get to work. They even have their homework. They raise their hands, they give right answers. By the end of the year, Davon gets a B+. And Marcus, good ol' Marcus, he earns the highest grade in the class.

“And *that*,” Brian said, “that is why I Teach for America!”

His final sentence became the end-line for each teacher’s victorious vignette. *That’s Why I Teach For America*. Every story had a problem, every story a solution. All offered redemption, and each gave us a reason to join the cause. *Why are you doing this?* relatives had asked. *Why not Baltimore County?* my fellow plane-rider had wondered. Now, sitting in the auditorium, I had a yearning: I wanted a redemptive story, too. I ached for sheer, unabashed success in the classroom. The classroom in which I’d never taught.

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Like all TFA corps members, I’d been carefully vetted for certain characteristics. Among four thousand applicants that year, one thousand were chosen, and each year, as the applications break the preceding year’s record, the program becomes more and more selective. In 2011, 48,000 people competed for roughly 5,200 slots. Today’s fresh, soon-to-be-graduates need to show proof of the same criteria I was held to years earlier: demonstrated past achievements, perseverance in the face of challenges, strong critical thinking, the ability to motivate and influence people, and respect for students and families of low-income communities.

“Why don’t they just take everyone that applies?” I’d asked my TFA interviewer back in Philadelphia. “If the schools really need teachers, why not just accept everyone?”

The interviewer shook her head. “Because not everyone can do it,” she said, an indication that my prospective future contained much more than the smiling teacher-faces of the TFA marketing brochures.

Founder, Wendy Kopp, also had in mind an element of elitism to “the corps” (as TFA-ers call it), which explains why substantial chunks of Yale’s, Harvard’s, and Princeton’s graduating classes also apply each year. Make it as tough to get into as law or med school and maybe, just maybe, a national corps of teachers can attract the ass-busting high-achievers, the presidents of student governments, the relentless advocates for social causes, the impressive A-type college kids who already founded their own nonprofits at age twenty-one.

Perhaps this is how TFA earned its stereotype: according to the caricature, the typical TFA teacher is a white, upper-middle-class, “privileged” (a.k.a., spoiled), recent Ivy League grad with hopes of becoming a lawyer or doctor like daddy but isn’t quite ready to head to grad school just yet. Instead, he or she would rather use privileged hands to make this messy, needy world a better place, and so plunges into lower-class America to save all the poor black kids. Or poor Hispanic kids. In just two years. After that,

it's a straight path for Yale, the Bar exam, a bar for the celebratory toast. The stereotype appeared on the TV show *Boston Public* when a pretty TFA teacher, Kimberly Woods, tells her class that what she *really* wants to be is a lawyer, but she's here with them to "make a difference." In other words, *they* are her *difference* to be *made*. The stereotype also reared its head in one of my favorite memoirs, Dave Eggers' bestseller, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. I quote Eggers, who's channeling the voice of his cynical past self: "We fault the nonprofit [TFA] for attempting to solve inner-city problems, largely black problems, with white upper-middle-class college-educated solutions." TFA, he says, is "enlightened self-interest." "Paternalistic condescension." For support, Eggers quotes an unnamed professor: "A study of Teach for America tells us more about the ideological, even psychological needs of today's middle-class white and minority youth than it does about the underclass to whom the project is targeted."

Like many, I didn't fit the stereotype: I didn't want to be a doctor or a lawyer and I didn't attend an Ivy League school. Though I grew up in an over-sized, air-conditioned suburban Philly home, it was my mother's lone win in a drawn-out divorce, a home she struggled to maintain on her secretary's salary so that I'd have some "stability." Until she remarried, we pinched pennies to maintain what was probably a façade of middle-class respectability. And TFA was not a step on my career ladder. I didn't have a career ladder. I had an English Literature degree with a Religious Studies minor. I'd spent my undergraduate years on Shakespeare, Buddhist Philosophy, Contemporary Drama, Death and Dying, Modern Poetry, Taoism, the Logics of God. I knew a fair bit about the Taoist concept of *wei-wu-wei* and the Buddhist notion of no-self, the blank verse in Shakespeare's plays and the narrative consciousness in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. But I rarely studied subjects that were tangibly relevant to a world of employers, and I had no idea what to do with my education. I thought maybe I'd find a home in teaching. If I loved learning, maybe I could continue on the other side of the classroom.

Without an education degree, though, where could I teach? I looked into a few private school positions. The more I learned, however, about the academic performance of high-income students as compared to their low-income peers, the less I wanted to serve those American kids who were performing just fine without me. I learned that a child born into a low-income neighborhood was far less likely to finish high school. I learned that I, blessed by a well-funded public school with its swimming pool and planetarium and brightly-lit, weeded football field—I had it easy when it came to education. Out of the 400 students who entered my ninth-grade class, 390 of us graduated. For the kids in my honors and Advanced Placement classes, we expected college like we expected water to pour

from a tap. In grade school, when I slapped my right hand over my chest and faced the American flag and absent-mindedly recited my allegiance to it, I'd sensed in those red and white stripes some kind of American birth-right that I could *Achieve the Impossible* or *Be All That I Can Be*. But I later learned that my urban peers were likely seeing something altogether different in those stars and stripes—something empty, something flimsy in the fabric even—as they pledged their allegiance to a country that offered, as a primary stepping stone to their American dreams, schools that were failing them.

Somewhere along the way, I became troubled by the disparities between the haves and the have-nots. Somehow I'd formed enough altruistic opinions that my beloved Republican stepfather disparagingly referred to me as "A Liberal."

But I didn't necessarily believe I could "save the poor children." I was raised on the postmodern stance that the victors of wars became the writers of histories, that whoever has the audacity to think they can bring redemption to a people is akin to colonial Chris Columbus and Co. I was an irony-loving child of the eighties, prone to sarcasm, suspicious of Hallmark, and I believed that we were, all of us, a little broken. How could I "save" anyone?

And yet. And *yet*, the world was still broken. And thousands of idealistic college graduates—yes, many of whom were white—were willing to help, or at least try. I had landed in my generation's postmodernist predicament: even if, as Eggers's expert points out, our ways of trying to fix things might say more about our own brokenness than the targets of our salvation, couldn't and shouldn't we still do *something*?

Educational inequity is our nation's greatest injustice. You can change this.

So read Teach For America's website, and the second sentence was the key. It invited you. *You* could change this. Not *him* or *her* or some hero in a teacher movie. *You* could make a difference. It tugged at the heartstrings of just the person TFA was seeking—a hard-working believer in something better.

My college roommate, Mark, and I filled out applications, hoping our achievements were enough to prove to TFA our worth. I was: an honors student at the University of Delaware, president of the on-campus student government, founder of a student writing club, and recently named one of the university's "Women of Promise." Mark was: also an honors student, also president of a major student organization, a volunteer clown in a children's hospital, and a full-time worker while putting himself through school. To boot, he was the kind of guy everyone loves—energetic, optimistic, and outgoing. After writing essays that detailed our "greatest life challenges" and how we overcame them, and after ranking where we'd

like to devote our two years should we get chosen (we both picked California's Bay Area), we were each offered interviews.

With eleven other strangers my age, most white, a few Asian, I sat in an office room in Philadelphia and began the full-day interview. We'd been told to prepare a five-minute lesson. I stood at the center of a semi-circle of young adults, all of whom acted as my hypothetical high school English students, and I attempted to teach iambic pentameter. The few minutes flew by in a blur of *When forty winters shall besiege thy brow*, and I sat down, having no idea whether I'd just sunk to the bottom of some Olympic-sized teaching pool or swam victoriously across. Others taught fractions, gravitational pull. Some looked sweaty and nervous. One man limped awkwardly to the front of the room but then taught enthusiastically about addition.

Those "privileged" false stereotypes aside, there *was* still something about TFA people, I realized as I waited with the other candidates for my one-on-one interview. Something intense and relentless. While we waited, the limping candidate, Jake, who'd quickly become a pseudo-leader among us, told us our odds: out of the twelve, he said, only four would "make it." Only four would be chosen. This led us to look around and wonder, who were the four? Or rather, I wondered, *Who were the other three*, because Jake seemed like a shoe-in to me.

"I want this. Bad," Jake said.

"I do, too," the only other male candidate chimed in eagerly, as though a video camera were capturing the conversation and he had to assert his devotion. We were used to being watched all afternoon, and I understood his difficulty in remembering that there was no longer anyone to impress.

"I definitely want this," Jake said, ignoring the other guy. Both men wore suits. The two talked about which cities they listed as their top choices. With the certainty of world travelers, they hailed the virtues of Baltimore, New Orleans, and every other possible TFA destination.

"What did you write for your 'biggest challenge' essay?" Jake asked the other guy. The gauntlet had been thrown. The rest of us had just become witnesses to a showdown.

The guy rambled about a story I quickly forgot and then asked Jake in return.

Jake lifted one pant leg to his knee and knocked on his shin, which was not a shin but a metal pole. The pole gave a hollow, tinny sound. "Lost a leg as a kid," he said, and dropped his pant.

"Wow," said the other guy.

The rest of us were silent. I'd written about losing my stepfather to cancer and presiding over a student government in the same year, but I was glad I hadn't been asked. The one-upmanship was apparently male-specific—two alphas sniffing one another out. Here's the thing: the guy didn't say

“wow” to Jake as in, *How amazing that you’ve lived your life with an artificial leg*. Rather, he said “wow” as in *That’s a good one. That beats mine. That will surely get you “in.”*

Jake nodded and then looked toward the closed door of the interviewer’s room. He knew he’d just won the showdown. And I knew I’d just witnessed a telling snapshot of at least one kind of Teach For America candidate: fervent; relentlessly competitive; ready to turn tragedy into redemption; aware, in fact, that such stories were commodities. It was daunting to see. Prone to self-doubt—as well as a neurotic compulsion to share my faults—I wasn’t sure I could meet TFA’s expectations. But Jake’s behavior was also fascinating. I kept hearing his earlier remark—*I want this. Bad*—and it itched at me. *How could he know?* I thought. None of us quite knew what *this*—a two-year stint with TFA—would bring, and if we couldn’t know for sure, then what exactly was *this* that Jake so desperately wanted? Entrance into an elite group? Another notch on a personal totem pole of triumph?

A part of me wants these things, too, I realized as I waited in the spring for the *yay or nay* letter from TFA. Yes, I loved learning and so I wanted to try my hand at teaching, and yes, I wanted to join the cause—the fight for educational equity—and this accounted for a good ninety-five percent of my motivations. But as I awaited a response from TFA, I noticed another, quieter, less altruistic motive: I wanted to be chosen. I wanted TFA’s mark of approval on my undergraduate self. Little did I know that the organization, by design, intended this reaction, that Wendy Kopp wanted us to see teaching as a selective, privileged field.

When the acceptance letters came—one for Mark and one for me—I felt an elated rush, but I also raised a suspicious eyebrow on myself. A need for external validation was no reason to assume a post in front of classrooms of students. In fact, I was fairly certain that a classroom would do the opposite of stroking my ego. On the porch of our college house, where I’d studied for tests that I’d aced and researched papers I’d also aced and written poems that had won their meager prizes, I signed my name to Teach For America’s forms, knowing that the swoop in my signature was a final farewell to a diet of steady college accolades. They call this *the real world*, I thought.

Though I never again saw the unofficial loser of the alpha male showdown, I wasn’t surprised when I saw Jake in Houston for training.

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It was 7 A.M., and those of us lucky to have the “late” schedules were grabbing our pre-made vinyl lunch bags off the tower of stacked steel trays before catching the yellow school buses.

22 **TEACHING IN THE TERRORDOME**

"Teach For America!" said a stout corps member, Frank, who projected his normally scratchy, nasal voice so that it mocked the voice-over of an advertisement. "Serving, for ten years, the school's *you've* abandoned!" The word, *you've*, hit a peppy up-note and then slid down scale, just like in some outdated commercial.

A bunch of us cracked up.

"Plastic mattresses," his buddy, Ben, said. "Moldy showers. That's why *I* teach for America."

"Four hours of sleep," added another. "Feelings of guilt over decades of white supremacy. That's why *I* Teach for America!"

More laughter from the group.

Listing the difficulties of "Institute" (as it was known) in the satirical style of the Opening Ceremonies became a pressure valve to release our stress. Just a few days into our training, I'd learned that this "teacher boot camp" was indeed as grueling as TFA had said. The five weeks became, intentionally or not, a kind of hazing period to see who was truly devoted to the cause. We woke no later than six A.M. (and some of us woke much earlier), got dressed in our "professional attire," took buses sometimes an hour to our schools, and attended a full seven hours' worth of diversity discussions, lesson planning workshops, curriculum training, literacy training, teaching observations, and one-on-one coaching. In the second week, we would also start teaching classes. When we returned to campus, we squeezed dinner in before heading off to even more workshops on topics like "creating successful management systems" and "making content meaningful." The especially ambitious among us—and in TFA, there were a lot—somehow fit a workout or distance run into the day. By nine or ten at night, we met with our team of three other new teachers, called "corps members," where we completed assignments and, once we began teaching, co-planned our lessons for the next day. In the remaining late-night hours, we read articles for tomorrow's classes and grabbed the mid-night shuttle to Kinko's for copy-making. It was an eighteen-hour day. By the afternoon, imaginary demonic thumbs pressed into my skull: a stress headache. I wasn't accustomed to them.

At night we passed out in overly air-conditioned, ice-cold dorm rooms. Our beds were on thin, crunchy plastic mattresses that rolled in and out of the walls like drawers, and the windows in the residential towers wouldn't open. We joked that this was suicide prevention. My particular floor also housed the garbage chute and reeked of rotting fruit. In the few minutes before my roommate, Jada, and I went to sleep, we each read passages from our palm-sized "365 days of inspiration" books. Mine: *365 Tao: Daily Meditations by Deng Ming-dao*. Hers: *365 Meditations for African American Women*.

"In the beginning," I read to her, half mocking and half sincere, "all things are hopeful."

"Each day is new," she read, also equal parts ironic and true. "Praise God that each minute is new."

In the next minute, we passed out.

As a roommate, Jada was the ideal foil to my self-doubting, introverted, and hyper-planned self. She was whimsical, outgoing, and brash. Though I'd read my TFA articles days before Institute, Jada hadn't even looked at hers on the plane. While I'd arrived punctually for training, somehow Jada had strolled in near midnight and missed Opening Ceremonies all together. It wasn't her fault her plane had been late, but I was fascinated by how she'd handled it: she couldn't have cared less. She hadn't prepared, she'd missed the first event, and all she could do was shrug. It took a lot to faze her.

Which was why she shocked me one afternoon when she charged into the room, crying. "TFA's nothing but a fucked up white-person's organization!" she shouted and flopped onto her mattress with a plastic crunch.

Relieved that, for once, it was Jada and not me who showed signs of breaking, I readied to leap into the role of supportive roommate. But then she murmured "Sorry," as though the color of my skin put me in cahoots with the organization, and that one word *sorry* covered up, like a manhole, an opening into the darker emotions Jada had for TFA. When I asked what happened, she just shook her head and said something vague about her CMA team.

The CMAs—Corps Member Advisories—consisted of usually twelve corps members, advised by a single TFA alum, and those groups broke down into three smaller groups of co-teaching and co-planning teams. These teams of four broke down once again into pairs for still more in-depth co-teaching and co-planning. In the larger groups of twelve, the advisors led us through discussions on all kinds of topics, but for the first week, we focused on diversity. While TFA had given us only five weeks to learn everything we possibly could about teaching (planning a lesson, designing a unit, managing classrooms of kids, handling difficult students, accommodating special needs kids, and so on and so on), the organization spent a substantial amount of time unearthing assumptions about race, class, power, and privilege. Issues of race and class, latent in most American conversations, were now the primary focus.

"Stand if you identify as white," our advisor, Tamika, announced to our group early in the first week. We'd arranged ourselves in a circle, and seven of the twelve stood up. "Stand if you identify as African American." Four stood, including Tamika. "As Asian." Two stood. "As Latino." None stood. But then came the more private matters. "Stand if you identify as straight."

“As gay.” “Stand if you identify as Muslim.” “Christian.” “Lower-class.” On and on went the categories, and we stood up or remained seated accordingly. My threshold for divulging personal details has always been higher than the average person’s, but the activity still made me uncomfortable—TFA had just required all its members to “out” themselves—on religion, on sexuality, on class categories. What if one of our group members hadn’t wanted to share with people he or she only met four days ago?

Despite its potential damages, the activity had an eventual point. TFA’s first principle for excellent teaching can be summed up in two words: high expectations. Hold the bar high and all your students will rise to meet it, we were told. It didn’t matter how swank your management systems were for collecting homework, or how entertaining your lessons were for multiplication. You could erase the benefits of any teacher-magic if you stepped into your classroom believing your inner-city or rural kids weren’t really capable of the same work their middle-class peers produced. You could negate all of your training if, regardless of your own background, you let a certain thought pop into your head: *These kids can’t do it*. On the road to our students’ potential triumphs, we were told, we could be the first to sabotage them. Consequently, our advisors asked us to take inventory of our identities, to reflect on the degree of power that our various categories provided, and to investigate the subconscious beliefs we held about those in positions of less power.

The message we got from TFA was this: nothing could stand in the way of our kids’ success, nothing, so long as we teachers believed in it. So long as we set expectations audaciously high for our students, our students would rise to meet them. This was an energizing belief that most, including me, quickly bought. When a corps member voiced dissent by suggesting that other factors played significant roles in a child’s success—parental involvement, nutrition, a student’s motivation—our advisors steered them back to the message. Students did poorly in school primarily because society expected them to perform poorly. To suggest otherwise was to engage in the same kind of low expectations and racist and/or classist assumptions that dug students into the academic holes they were in. We had to imagine great things for our students. Huge teaching successes. Reading levels raised three grades in one year. Seriously engaged students with hands raised and national test scores raised and everything: raised. These kinds of expectations, at least in my mind, were accompanied by inspirational background music that might accent a movie montage. Children working at desks, writing, erasing. Teacher moving around desks, calling on children, high-fiving students, jumping for joy. Yes! Learning! Hip-hop’s closest kin to “Eye of the Tiger” coursed through my mental imagery.

Perhaps eager to hear that we were all that mattered in “solving the nation’s greatest injustice,” we rarely refuted these theories. I’d heard that when the rare corps members wouldn’t come around to this keystone of TFA philosophy, he or she was flagged and put on an improvement plan. This seemed to be the case for Chin, although he exhibited issues beyond just an inability to embrace Institute theory.

After meeting his Houstonian students on the first day, Chin, a teacher in my twelve-person group, announced, “My kids are really sweet. They’re nothing like I thought they’d be.”

We were reflecting on our first lessons in yet another share-circle. As soon as the two unassuming sentences slipped from his mouth, I cringed. The concept was an obvious “no-no” in TFA. Kendra, an African American woman with shoulder-length braids, pounced first. “Why’d you think they’d be *mean*, Chin?” I’d seen her lighthearted, I’d seen her worried, I’d seen her transform into witty confidence before her students, but in this moment, she’d become a stern pseudo-therapist.

Chin straightened his back against the plastic chair and shifted his eyes. “I don’t knooow,” he said, lengthening the last word like a kid does when he resists an adult’s question.

Much about Chin seemed kid-like. He was a pudgy Korean-American guy with a disproportionately large head. Supposedly a Harvard science genius, he was among the many Ivy-League grads who pursued TFA, but he struggled with everything about Institute—the expectations, the philosophy, the very act of teaching. Though we were encouraged to cultivate our commando-teacher voice, Chin’s words were quiet and mumbled, and he sometimes stuttered. On his first day of teaching, Chin plowed through his lesson plan in ten minutes and, instead of asking the kids questions or tossing out a riddle for them to solve or doing anything, anything to fill the time, he simply looked at his watch, shrugged, and *left the room*.

“You can’t do that, Chin!” Tamika yelled.

To the rest of us, she talked in a warm, encouraging voice and smiled brightly, but with Chin, she scolded. Often when he said something, she looked at him with a furrowed brow, mouth hung open, head cocked to one side. Then she lifted her eyes to the ceiling, took a deep breath, and plunged into an explanation of what I think she’d assumed was common sense. “When you’re a teacher, Chin, you become entrusted with your kids. You have to *stay with* them.” That was her first response. “And Chin, these kids are in *summer* school. They didn’t pass the eighth *grade*! Do you really think you taught them everything they need to learn in ten minutes?”

Chin went verbally limp in the face of these questions. He shrugged, he mumbled, he shuffled away. But, as cruel as it seems, Chin’s natural incompetence presented itself with an upside: it showed the rest of us

our comparable competence. We knew, for instance, to stay in our classrooms. And even if we feared that our kids might unleash violent potty mouths upon hearing our introductory sentences, as the kids in Hollywood's "ghetto-teacher-movies" did, we knew not to say, "My kids are really sweet—they're nothing like I thought they'd be."

Once the question popped from Kendra's mouth, "Why'd you think they'd be mean?" Chin looked like he'd been caught taking some piece of candy that he'd assumed was free. *Who, me? What did I do?* It was familiar territory for him. Kendra wouldn't let his "I don't know" become the final word. She pressed him.

Chin shrugged, said he didn't know why, and then said, "Because kids in the ghetto can be violent?"

I cringed and watched our three black corps members respond. Kendra scooted to the edge of her chair. Mia folded her arms against her chest. Robert, who had the unfortunate luck of being partnered with Chin, kept his lips sealed. He was cataloging the sentence for a clever punch-line that I knew would later make me spit my soda.

Kendra began the justified lecture on how Chin had no prior experience with "kids in the ghetto," so he couldn't possibly assume they'd be one way or another. The rest of us sat back and watched the inevitable vortex of racial tension.

Tamika did the hard thing; she turned the topic back on all of us.

"You have to be really honest with yourself," she said. "You have to be completely honest about what society teaches you, about the kinds of assumptions you're going into your classroom with. What are they? What has society told you?"

Someone offered the responses we'd been learning in the TFA literature. "A lot of people might assume that under-resourced minority groups can't achieve to the same standards as 'the culture of power'. But of course it's exactly because 'the culture of power' has this perception that minority groups face the challenges they do today." This was the diplomatic answer. This was the right answer. We, as relatively high-achievers on things like standardized tests, were adept at offering right answers.

But Tamika wasn't interested in our paraphrase of Lisa Delpit's *Other People's Children*. Someone else talked about how members of "the culture of power" dominate mainstream media; images on the news and television often reflect the inherent prejudices of the culture of power and are then passed on. We all had to be aware, this person said, of these images and not let them obstruct the high expectations we had for our students.

We nodded. I looked at Tamika, who I thought would be pleased. Her brow furrowed. She pressed her pointer fingers against one another and

they wiggled back and forth like a charmed snake. “Why is it that when a group of black guys head our way on the street, we tense up?”

No one answered. I knew what Tamika wanted; she wanted us to get personal. I saw a classic scene from my teenage years—a Ben Franklin statue rising above Philadelphia, the rush of cabs and cars on wet Market Street, my mother and stepfather behind me. My sister and I always walked faster than they did; we were eager to roam the city on our own. We weaved through the crowds, laughing at our own jokes. An old lady or two passed. Three black guys passed. I felt my stepfather’s hand on my elbow.

Once we returned to our two-story home, surrounded by mowed grass and other two-story homes, he told me, “You might be wise, but you’re not streetwise.” I didn’t know the “dangers of the city,” he said. Back in the suburbs, I realized what my stepfather meant by “dangers of the city.”

Still, I didn’t respond to Tamika. It was hard enough to acknowledge the flaws, the ignorance, the—let’s face it—racism of the people who had loved me best and whom I still mourned the loss of; even worse to confess it to near-strangers.

Nobody answered Tamika’s question. She finally said, “I even get tense, and *I’m black*.” Her long, unpainted fingernails pointed at her temples. Her shaved head accentuated her high-cheekbones. “I sometimes walk to the other side of the street. Now why is that? What have people told us about the kinds of kids we’re teaching? What have your friends and family said to you about your commitment to TFA?”

Heads sunk down again, or looked away and out the window. Outside, the concrete ground looked wavy in the hundred-degree heat. I was eons away from my upbringing, thousands of miles from my home. My mother and sister had said they were proud of me. My mother had also said she could never do what I was doing. My mother had also agreed that I shouldn’t park my car in the same spot once I’d settled in Baltimore. I looked down at my hands. I saw I’d been picking my thumbnail cuticle. It was raw and pink. If he were alive, I thought, my stepfather would be clutching my elbow. I smoothed my torn cuticle over with my other thumb.

In that moment, Matthew, stocky Matthew with the South Carolinian accent and the striped, preppy neckties—a twenty-two-year-old white kid who might greet you with a hearty “Morning” at a Baptist church—Matthew made a little whimper, bowed his head, and put his hand to his forehead like a visor on a cap. His body shook as he cried. He inhaled again and then let out a sob.

The rest of us were shocked. It was the unlikeliest of breakdowns. The stoic, exceedingly polite, rarely emoting Matthew: now driven to hyperventilation. Someone thought to hand him a tissue.

Eventually, he gained enough composure to speak. "My friends. Back at home. They say to me," he paused to take a breath, and his diaphragm shuttered on the inhale like a child who'd been crying too hard. "They say, Matthew. Why're you going. To teach," another staggered, kiddish inhale, "a bunch a nigs." He blurted the last word in a wet, sudden sob. With that, his shoulders collapsed again.

Tamika asked him what he said to his friends.

"I said, 'Don't call 'em that.'" He wiped his face again with the tissue and looked at us like we were those bar buddies. "'Don't call them that. Call them . . . call them *under-resourced*!'" He shouted the last two words. They were high-pitched and wet, and the slippery echoes of the *S*'s in the word, *under-resourced*, sat in the Houston room with us, where the air-conditioner droned and the windows sealed us from the heat that warbled the lines of the one-story, patched-roof shacks across the street. The table at the front of the classroom stood like a pulpit from where nobody was preaching, nobody was teaching, and nobody said a thing. *Under-resourced*. It felt like the lamest replacement for what Matthew's Carolina buddies really meant.

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If mastering cultural sensitivity had been the only requirement for success in the classroom, perhaps Institute wouldn't have been so grueling. Indeed, it took far more than "high expectations," despite TFA's maxim, and the planners of Institute must have known this, hence the hours upon hours of training on literacy, curriculum designing, cognitive development, higher-order thinking, classroom management, diversified instruction, special needs students, and on and on. The topics seemed as endless as the many ways that a teacher could screw up.

Unbeknownst to me, I'd impressed Tamika with my first lesson. I'd chosen the story "Salvador, Late or Early" for my nine summer school kids to read. As soon as I announced the title, Malika, a vocal girl, complained. "I already *read* this story!" she shouted.

"Oh," I said and improvised. "That's great." I kept counting copies, separating them between my fingers, sending them in small stacks down the rows. "I love reading things more than once. You can always get more out of a story the second time."

This was the comment that led Tamika to believe I was "a natural," an opinion I didn't learn about until another, later lesson had gone so poorly that I burst into tears afterward. But on the first day, before students read the one-page tale about a forty-pound, impoverished, neglected kid named Salvador, I pulled out colored pencils and asked them to draw images of

their homes. It was supposed to be an “engagement activity,” a “hook,” as TFA called it, a way to get students interested in the lesson to come. I knew that they’d be able to relate to at least some aspects of Salvador, who “lives behind a raw wood doorway,” as Sandra Cisneros writes, “where homes are the color of bad weather.” The description could have fit the shacks around the school.

On a blank white page, one kid set to work on a two-story house with classic four-paned windows, a pointed triangular roof, a chimney, a green yard, and a balanced tree off to the side. I glanced at the desk of the student beside him. He drew a virtually identical rendition of the classic American home. In fact, student after student had drawn, not his or her own place of residence, which I knew more closely resembled the peeling one-story shacks nearby, the ones with broken windows and yards of abandoned debris that we corps members had seen a week ago when we’d toured the communities. Instead, each kid drew cartoon versions of the typical middle-class suburban life.

It troubled me. Why didn’t they draw the truth? It was possible that they were too ashamed. But they churned out the clichés so fast that it seemed like they didn’t know they were even *allowed* to represent the truth. Or maybe, after years of seeing on television sitcoms what American life should look like, they thought I was asking them to mirror it back to me.

I later told Tamika about the drawings. I thought she’d offer some solution, some way to empower my students to bear witness to real experiences. But she just shrugged and offered a nod. *Yep*, I felt she was saying. *That’s the ‘culture of power’ in action.* “What do you expect, you know?” Tamika said. “When they’re surrounded by versions of the world that don’t look anything like their lives?” Tamika didn’t have an answer for how to empower my students to express the truth. *That’s your work in the classroom*, I felt she was telling me. *That’s your job to figure out.* It was a motivating challenge, and I left feeling empowered to make headway.

But the track on which a person learns to teach is unpredictable, rickety and ever-undulating, and my empowerment got quickly replaced by feelings of ineptitude. In my third lesson, I’d based half the lesson on the homework I’d assigned the day before. When I asked students to take out their homework, only one student had it. The rest had nothing to show. Flustered and surprised by their apathy, I moved onto part two of the lesson. “Get into your groups from yesterday,” I said, a sentence that might as well have been, “Commence doing whatever it is that you desire.”

Some kids threw their heads on their desks. Others stood up and talked. Malika wandered around, laughing, cracking jokes to other kids. Nine students. That’s all I had. Why couldn’t I get them under control?

"Get into your groups," I commanded, but Malika spun toward me, hand on her hip, and shouted, "We don't *know* our groups. We don't *remember* them!"

Later, Tamika told me that this was a lie—students remembered their groups, but they liked to pretend that they forgot them. The charade bought them a few minutes of chaos. But *I* didn't remember the groups. I'd created them the day before, and I hadn't written them down. How stupid, I thought. I couldn't keep track of the simplest things. I threw the kids into new groups and gave them their assignment, which they didn't do, and which, I realized mid-lesson, was just busy work. I didn't know how to salvage the moment, so all I could think to do was let the clock run out. From the back of the room, four corps members and a faculty advisor made disapproving faces and jotted notes down on forms. I was the failure at the front of the class. When I left the room that day, I realized I hadn't even remembered to take attendance.

These were minor struggles compared to what I'd face in Charm City, and I sensed this. How could I handle a full-day of teaching in Baltimore if I couldn't even manage nine students for forty-five minutes in Houston? When I found Tamika, I was on the brink of crying, and we sat outside on a step in the heat where I told her I thought I might not be cut out for this.

She looked stunned. "*Noo*, Heather, you've got a knack for this." She described what she saw on that first day. "I was like, Wow, she's a natural!"

Tamika glowed with her usual optimism, but this time it wasn't rubbing off. I countered with a list of my many mistakes. Tamika proceeded to use each as a mini-lesson for the future. Don't ever base a lesson on homework, she said. She drew a diagram to illustrate why this was so. And if I had trouble remembering attendance, I should make a list each day of all the things I needed to do in a lesson. I should put "attendance" at the top of the list. "Why do you think I carry a clipboard everywhere?" she asked. It was true; the clipboard extended from Tamika's arm like an extra appendage.

When I went back into the air-conditioned school, I felt a bit stronger in resolve but no more competent, and with good reason: I *was* incompetent. To varying degrees, we all were. Herein rests one of the greatest tensions of TFA: it hand-selects, for its mission, those who are typically adept at succeeding, those who in some cases (mine included) are even addicted to success. Though we were diverse in many ways, we'd been chosen because we were over-achieving, talented do-gooders with leadership, charisma, and skill. We'd graduated at the tops of our classes, earned high scores on standardized tests, served as presidents of this organization or that. In classic résumé language, we'd touted our achievements on paper: we'd "facilitated and managed" X and "increased profit margins" of Y and

“successfully engineered” Z. We were accustomed to chasing—and catching—the carrot. We thousand were not accustomed to failure.

But teaching is a complex craft, and novices are destined, in some way or another, to fail. Adding another dozen hurdles to the obstacles, our future students would be some of the least prepared in the nation, our schools the lowest funded, our administrations the most unstable. We were assuming the toughest teaching posts in America, posts that many teachers spent their lives avoiding. TFA designed Institute with the intensity of a boot camp because the organization attempted to cover everything a newbie needed, but it could only accomplish so much in five weeks. At Institute, the chasm between the successes we corps members typically achieved and the dire conditions the educational crisis posed created little walking time bombs inside each of us. We had, in most cases, never failed so miserably. (After all, we’d written those “greatest challenges” essays, which we knew were meant to end in victory.)

Among everyone I talked to, this tension—a tension between our proclivities for success and the inevitabilities of our failures—didn’t go unnoticed. Many of us saw that TFA recruited a certain “type,” the exceedingly hard-working, die-hard type, the type who would sacrifice his or her well-being for the good of a cause. We were often told not to expect to have lives outside of teaching. Bridging the achievement gap would take everything we had—every hour of every waking day. Don’t expect to go to the movies.

The combination of this type and the TFA mission created incredible pressure. Some of us unraveled early. Melinda was my teaching partner, which meant we collaborated on every lesson and delivered it identically to different sets of students. A white, extroverted woman, Melinda had a manic, scattered disposition. She worked herself so hard one evening that she crashed only an hour before wake-time, slept through her alarm, and missed the bus to the high school where we trained and taught. This led her with no means of transportation, but in her desperate attempt to arrive on time, she chose what to me was beyond the realm of options: she stuck out her thumb on an unknown street of Houston and pleaded for a ride. Only a few minutes late, she raced into the school unharmed and un-showered. As soon as she had a chance to sit, she burst into tears. She could have been hurt, she said. She could have been raped. But failure—or, in this case, missing a day of Institute—was not an option.

Although almost all of us wore the stress of wanting to succeed, we didn’t all wear it the same. Robert used sarcasm, though the increasingly darker bags beneath his eyes belied his good humor. He and I worked on the same schedule at Institute, teaching in the morning and immediately meeting up with others in the faculty lounge for, ostensibly, reading and planning. More typically, we used the time to crash on the old couches and stare at the

ceiling like zombies. Whenever I arrived in the room, Robert was sitting in his usual position: torso sunk into a ratty brown couch, head thrown over the top, butt hanging off the old cushion. I plopped down next to him.

"How'd it go?" I always asked, hoping that, for the both of us, he had greater success in his class.

"Oh," he laughed one day and lifted his head. "I'm just the James Brown of teaching. I'm like the Godfather of Education. I'm like, 'Get up, get on up!'" James Brownian enthusiasm leaped into Robert's voice, and then just as quickly leaped out. A low, exhausted tone returned. "And they're like, 'Umm, who the fuck this?'"

The air-conditioner droned.

"It's like," and then Robert simulated his neck hanging from a rope. "Somebody. Help me!"

I wrote the headline: "Teacher Hangs Himself in Middle of Terrible Lesson."

"No, I mean that's what the *students* were doing. I wasn't even making complete sentences. Subjects? Verbs? What? Where am I?"

I laughed. Disaster was less tragic when narrated by Robert. We made light of our ineptitude. We asked each other when Teach For America would deliver, along with the daily turkey sandwiches and oatmeal cookies in our packed lunches, the precious microchip, the one we could insert into our brains somewhere next to my theories on the aesthetics of blank verse and his reverence for Henry Louis Gates, Jr. The chip would make us capable of doing what seemed a perfectly feasible profession. The chip would make it so that, by the end of our lessons, our students actually learned; they had internalized some new knowledge and could demonstrate it, and didn't look at us with pained expressions.

On the wall of that teacher's lounge read a motivational sign I stared at each afternoon like a Zen koan: "Sometimes you have to build your wings on the way down."

What happens, I always thought, if you jump out of the plane with your wing-materials in hand but can't build them fast enough before your face hits the ground? In Robert's voice, this would have been funny. But in my own, the question haunted me with dull seriousness.

One day I taught what, to me, felt like a bona fide, competent lesson—it had a clear goal, the activity fit the goal, the students completed the activity, and I handed the group off to Kendra with satisfaction, who taught them social studies. Success! Or at least I had deemed it as much. My school advisor, a veteran Houston teacher employed by TFA, stopped me on the way out. She'd observed the entire lesson, and I readied for her praise.

Her fuchsia lips curled into a smirk but she shook her head. "You didn't close," she nearly sang in a melody that might accompany a finger-wagging.

She meant I hadn't reflected back on what the lesson had accomplished; I hadn't reminded students of our goal together and how we'd achieved it. It was a minor aspect of a lesson plan, but one we'd been taught to remember. I sighed and left her behind. She was right. My lesson hadn't been perfect.

I could have beaten myself up for imperfection. A part of me did. Another part of me knew that if I didn't pat myself on the back for small victories, I'd never survive as a teacher. And I'd achieved something that day—instead of pretending to be a teacher, I'd actually taught something. Most of the nuts and bolts of the job had come together that day, and with practice, they would again.

I arrived in the lounge, where Robert sat on the ratty brown couch. This time, though, rather than flopping into it, I sat up and faced him. "I've figured out our problem!"

He lifted his head, eyebrows raised, sensing I was ready to share more than our usual sarcasm.

"I don't know how to teach," I declared.

Robert blurted a single, mono-syllabic "hah" and threw his head over the top of the couch again.

"No, I mean really. I don't know how to teach now, but eventually I will."

It was honestly the first time I realized that teaching was a skill to cultivate, a craft to learn, not a micro-chip to receive or, as I had at one time suspected, a genetic coding to possess upon one's embryonic conception. But that was the trouble with many of us TFA types: we were accustomed to performing well. We weren't used to the humility of failure. As much as I liked hearing Tamika's proclamation that I was "A Natural," I'd figured out that, at least in this profession, no such thing existed. Nobody stood in front of a class for the first time and excelled. I didn't have much of an idea on how to teach, but I believed one day I would. Not necessarily in Houston, as none of us could learn how to proficiently perform our future jobs in just five weeks. But eventually I believed I'd learn. Until then, I'd practice and, if need be, I would pretend.

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On one of the final days at Institute, after all the students had left, several of us gathered in a vacant classroom to pass the time. It had been a long day, a long summer, and we were finally nearing the end. For an anomalous one hour, we had nothing we had to do. Someone picked up a piece of chalk, practiced swooping the cursive letters of her name across the blackboard. The rest of us joined in. *Mr. Hamden*, *Ms. Arnold*, *Ms. Kirn*. We created different renditions of our names, shaped the letters this way and that, then stood back and sized up our work.

"You have the best teacher-handwriting," one woman said to me.

"Your name looks most like a teacher," I said to someone else.

We were like kids playing make-believe. *Let's make believe I'm the teacher, and this is how I write.* Though we'd learned plenty of theories and strategies and tools and philosophies at Institute, we were still only pretending to do a job that we'd soon have to do for real.

It's poignant, I think, that I remember this moment better than I remember the Closing Ceremonies of Institute. Compared to our energy at the Opening Ceremonies, the new Teach For America corps was a less boisterous crowd, but we sat in the auditorium and heard a few more triumphant teacher-tales, this time told by the likes of us. My college roommate, Mark, stood on stage along with seven others and offered his "This is Why I Teach For America" moment, a moment he'd accrued during his five weeks at Institute. I remember being impressed with his stage presence, but I don't remember his story. I don't remember any of the stories. I remember, instead, a few newbie teachers, heavy with exhaustion and writing their names on a board in chalk, knowing that in a matter of weeks, they'd be responsible for rosters of kids.

After the Closing Ceremonies had newly minted us ready to teach America's low-income kids, we thousand new TFA teachers popped open plenty of bottles. Without a single additional workshop to attend the next day, without another new logistical system or teaching philosophy or learning modality to master for the immediate tomorrow, we newbie teachers meandered around the grounds of the University of Houston, shouting for joy and cracking jokes in our new Teacher-Speak and rejoicing that, after tonight, we didn't have to sleep on those crunchy plastic mattresses again. I watched even the most professional-seeming of teachers—the ones who'd easily assumed at least a mask of "competence"—wobble drunkenly around the lawns like they were once again college kids, free to wear flip-flops and master the art of leisure. Free to live in a world where the burdens of a social injustice didn't rest on their youthful, athletic shoulders.

After that evening, I never saw Matthew or Kendra or Melinda or Tamika, or Chin, for that matter, again. The next day, we all flew to different cities and rural towns across the country. We left to find apartments to rent, and roommates to live with, and cars to drive, and we left to learn about these new towns and cities that, in many cases, we barely knew. But mostly, we left to do what TFA had charged us with: construct our own teacher stories, stories that began with the challenging but surmountable conflict, that rose to the inevitable climax, that descended into the satisfying, conclusive victory. Stories, in other words, that could prove we had good reason, we had every right, we were destined to teach for America.