

Needham 1485 words

### Two Compliments by Recess

Monday. Winter. The worst of all combinations. I have two Year 8 classes to begin my day, each a living example of the Chaos Theory, here to suffer school's disciplined grind after their likely unshackled weekend.

8 Science 1 and 8 Science 8. Graded classes but not necessarily the intellectual penthouse and basement. Other factors have been at work. As I climb the stairs I hear 8 Science 1 before I see them. Unusually they are excited. It is not in anticipation of my lesson. Something has happened over the weekend.

Tom and Lyssa stand together. Tom the sporting legend in his own mind and Lyssa the style queen, both dressed in hybridised name-brand uniforms, looking more smug than usual. Tom's mates are sniggering and Lyssa's friends are a flutter. I note half my class distancing themselves from this peer pack.

They enter the laboratory and I call the roll. It reads like a character list from Tolkien's Middle Earth- Fleur, Skye, Storm, Cheyenne, Senio, Draven. Tom sits with Lyssa. This is new. His hand is on her knee. They've discovered one another over the weekend, probably at an unsupervised party where intoxication is a rite of passage and Discovery Learning takes on a whole new meaning. Some here can't wait to leave their childhood. They've been given anything they want and now expect everything.

I hand out my lesson, a Forensic Archaeology challenge involving a family who lived in Sydney's Rocks more than a hundred years ago. Katurah gets the blue copy. Her reading is an identified learning need.

I help Georgio settle. His mother is in hospital recovering from a brain tumour operation but how functional she will be her doctors don't yet know. We talk. He visited her last night. Her head is wrapped in bandages. Georgio says she looks like a soccer ball with a sad face.

There is a knock at the door and the Visual Arts teacher skips in uninvited, apologising loudly for all to hear. Her saccharine sweet smile leaves a sour taste in my mouth. She wants to take anyone interested in my class to an art exhibition at the Civic Centre. Immediately. I point out that she has not lodged the requisite school excursion form, not followed excursion protocol and has given no notice. Her saccharine smile freezes on her ageing painted face, replying smugly that she has the Deputy's permission. It's who you sleep with after all. I shrug and tell my class they have the choice to stay or go.

The flighty and the frivolous leave under the tutelage of a Queen Bee who is more like a school Drone. Serious students remain, many entitled to leave but they have chosen not to. The class mood relaxes.

They ask questions and are surprised to discover that syphilis affects certain human bones even in children, more surprised by the late nineteenth century photos I distribute showing The Rocks area around the time this family lived and died.

Callum asks about work experience in this field. A good sign. Brielle declares I've fabricated the entire forensic challenge and scientists can't infer so much from a skeleton. She is intelligent and opinionated. Eloise immediately rallies to my support, loyal and

defensive. A compliment. I allow the discussion to run unchecked. CSI gets a mention, so too Silent Witness.

They compare themselves to the children in the photos, images showing barefoot, dirty children. No designer labels here. I inform them that the kids in the photo could neither read nor write and are likely middle aged. The class seems shocked. Forget Discovery Learning. Learning to Discover is a more valuable lifelong lesson.

Undaunted, Brielle challenges me to reveal more alleged skeletal evidence. I tell her about lesions and wear and spurs in damaged bone joints and pelvic scarring in pregnant women. Brielle squirms. I might have stumbled upon a new contraceptive strategy for the Supervisor of Girls.

The bell rings. Period's end. My class files out still talking about skeletons.

Now for 8 Science 8 where paradigms are parables, where writing on a line is a valid educational outcome. Behaviourally challenged, educationally dysfunctional, socially fettered, life has already chewed them up and spat them out.

I hear them outside. I open the door to a seething mass. They are excited. It is not in anticipation of my lesson. I discover why. Some of them saw the Deputy and the Visual Arts teacher booking into a motel over the weekend. Both staff are married but not to each another. Khari describes their pubescent behaviour in the motel car park, she giggling and he flirtatious. It will be the talk of the school by lunch.

They jostle inside, Brian last in his wheelchair. Last week he was first into my lab while I was outside disciplining a student. He climbed onto a work bench and pretended to jump out of the first floor window only to catch his foot in the curtains. Then he indeed fell out.

Fortunately it had been raining for days and he only broke both his legs. I recall my phone call to his mother, a call followed by a protracted stunned silence.

There will be no Forensic Archaeology this lesson. The Human Digestive System. I will call the oesophagus a tube, the epiglottis a flap. No use using words they cannot pronounce, let alone spell.

Beatrice stares at me silently, never looking at the human torso. It is her way of attracting my attention. She gets none at home. Dad is in jail and mum spends her days at the club. Lily is silent too, sitting alone. The School Counsellor confided to me that last Christmas she was sexually assaulted by an uncle. No charges were laid. Her friends have learnt not to touch her as she can become violent.

I hand out a sheet on the Human Body for them to label and colour in using the torso as their reference. They like to colour in, perhaps clinging to a childhood they likely never had. Kris colours his heart black. He is a budding Goth. Ashish ignores the digestive tract, drawing frosties on the arms. Frosties are another rite of passage.

Julio draws drag racers, his specialty with flaming decals and extended exhausts. I have one above my desk, his present to me. Julio's father suicided on his birthday and he blames himself. I let him go. He'll finish his labelling before the rest of the class but his car comes first.

Sharon is working slowly. I try to check her pupils but she is awake to my intentions and stares fixedly at her book. Not one of her labels is near a line.

I move the class onto Question Time. This is where my lesson will count, if at all. I would like these kids to understand that their bodies are machines to be maintained. Carmel informs us her mother has her stomach stapled. Beatrice speaks, declaring that her father

swallowed nails in jail so he could have a holiday in hospital. Her story presents as a matter of family pride. Karli tells me she doesn't eat fruit though she will eat Snack Chocolate even though there's pineapple in it. She also asks why they package prawns in those stupid plastic shells that are really hard to peel. A hard question to answer without embarrassing her.

Todd speaks up for the first time. Todd with a man's body and a boy's brain. He can write his first name but can't spell his surname. We follow the same footie team. I am his surrogate father five periods a week. His own left him at birth. Mum is gone too. He lives with his grandmother who is seventy-six.

He asks me about Bulimia. The fact he can pronounce the word surprises me. I congratulate him on the best question so far. The class falls silent as I explain the condition. Lorenza asks about osteoporosis. I tell her how important it is for teenage girls to strengthen their bones before motherhood. For some motherhood might be a year away.

They are silent, listening. Brian declares he'll drink a litre of milk a day to fix his legs. I praise his intention. It will help his bones but not his brain.

The bell rings. Period's end.

They pack up and leave quietly, orderly. Lily departs last. I tell her I might keep her in because she did not ask me one question this lesson. She laughs, punching me playfully on the arm and saunters from the room, oblivious to the physical contact.

Her innocent spontaneity makes me smile. First there was Eloise's strident defence on my behalf and now Lily has unknowingly made her teacher's day a little brighter. It's the simple things that reinvigorate.

My morning coffee will taste a little sweeter. I have had two compliments by recess.

