

STORY GRAMMAR

by

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STORY GRAMMAR

FADE IN:

EXT. DRIVEWAY OUTSIDE ROCKLAND HIGH - DAY

Under the opening credits, general mayhem ensues including squad cars coming and going, an ambulance, a body bag, TV crews, students running out of the building, holding their noses.

WAKEEM

Naw, naw, man! I he'r' it be da 'raser again. He rub out anudder stu'ent, jus' befo' da break. One a dem Muslim kid.

DAUNTE

You trippin'! He bury dis vic'um alibe. I seed it my own se'f. Dey be knockin' da rats off da body, man. Dare be fingernails in da do' where da bruddah try to claw hisse'f ou'.

Close up of young woman in burqua and veil, tears rolling down her cheeks.

FADE TO BLACK

INT. DEX'S CLASSROOM - DAY

FADE IN

Students entering a classroom are greeted by their teacher. Chairs are arranged in a horseshoe around a small stage built next to the teacher's cluttered desk, with additional staging space on the floor in the room's center.

DEX

Good morning, Wakeem, Zoraida.
Ahh--the brain trust: Damien and A-sia!

LaRoger Whalley, 300-pounds of inert flesh, slogs inside and slumps into a seat. Brittany-Tiffany and Bododeo enter last, skipping inside just after the buzzer sounds, catching the door as Dex is swinging it closed.

DEX
(tooting Star Wars
stormtrooper
theme)

Group leader Tiffany-Brittany:
last chance to practice your
'Genesis' skit before tomorrow. I
hope you're ready.

TIFFANY-BRITTANY

We good.

Dex and others distribute with care African-style animal masks and costume pieces to several students. A giraffe, a baboon, and a lion mask sit atop students' heads, fastened with chin strings. Zofya records events with a video camera. Some students receive placards from Tiffany-Brittany telling the animal they are. She gingerly places a sign reading 'Sloth' in front of LaRoger, who is dozing.

ZORAIDA

Are we going to start, now? I
haven't got my lines.

ASIA

You don't stand there. I stood
next to Damien last time.

ZORAIDA

You did not!

ASIA

In the beginning, I did.

ZORAIDA

Damien was only filling in for
Daunte, who was in Oneroff's
office again. When he's here, you
stand next to Daunte.

ASIA

Where's Daunte?

ZORAIDA

He's not here.

ASIA

Will you shut up?! Just say your
first line.

ZORAIDA

I don't say the first line. I say
the second line.

Brittany-Tiffany, Bododeo, and Wakeem watch expectantly as Seth refuses to take his "Gorilla" sign. He wordlessly places the placard on an empty, nearby desk.

BODODEO

Dex, tell Seth he has to wear the
gorilla sign. He's holding up the
show.

TIFFANY-BRITTANY

Yeah, he's holding up my dress
rehearsal.

Students laugh derisively. Seth stares at his desk, avoiding eye contact. Dex realizes the "gorilla" assignment is a reference to Seth's dark skin.

DEX

Oh for crying out loud! This is
completely inappropriate--hate
speech, really! Seth can play
some other character.

BODODEO

Do you see any other gorillas in
the room?

DEX

Bododeo, what you are doing now is
not showing respect for others.

TIFFANY-BRITTANY

Here it comes.

DEX

For not showing concern, you earn
a negative 100 points. What you
need to do now is give Seth a part
he feels comfortable with.

TIFFANY-BRITTANY

I don't have any more signs, Dex.

DEX

This is ridiculous! I can't
believe juniors carrying on like
this, perpetuating racial sea
monkeys in the name of cruel
prejudice.

Dex takes White-out and a black marker to Seth's desk and deftly alters the placard with a few strokes.

DEX

There you go, Seth. Now you are "Godzilla"! Are you good with that?

Seth nods assent.

DEX

All right, Brittany. Tiffany. Brittany. By the way, which is it today?

TIFFANY-BRITTANY

It doesn't matter, today.

DEX

Okay, then. Brittany, is your team ready to rehearse? Start the narration!

Students in costume uncertainly arrange themselves. Tiffany-Brittany takes off her outer layer of clothes, revealing flesh-colored tights. A paper leaf flutters to the floor.

TIFFANY-BRITTANY

(coquettish)

Ooops! My fig leaf fell off.

DANIEL

I'll get it!

BODODEO

Move away from that leaf, Daniel!

TIFFANY-BRITTANY

He's just being helpful. Thank you, sweetie.

BODODEO

I'll kill him! You a dead man!

TIFFANY-BRITTANY

Get a life!

BODODEO

Why's he gotta be so joe, huh? You are so joe, white boy!

ZOFYA
 (videotaping)
 Will y'all start, already?
 Nothing's happened, and I'm half
 out of battery here.

ZORAIDA
 She's taping? My hair looks
 awful, today.

TIFFANY-BRITTANY
 Where's the snake?

Wakeem and James are carelessly dangling a three-person
 snake costume.

WAKEEM
 We're wai'ing for Daunte. He wen'
 for a smoke.

ZOFYA
 Somebody say the first line!

STUDENTS
 In the beginning, Genesis tells us
 the importance of THE WORD to
 creation.

Students appear as they will on the video record, framed in
 a monitor.

ZORAIDA
 (with authority)
 God merely utters the name for
 some phenomenon, and it comes
 leaping into existence.

ASIA
 Words discriminate between light
 and darkness, Heaven and Earth,
 the land and the sea.

DANIEL
 (reading)
 'With Adam's assistance, God
 categorizes the teaming life on
 the newly-formed Earth, producing
 a separate name for every beast,
 peep, and creep.'

Daniel as Adam and a rod puppet of a giant hand representing
 God make movements to correspond with Dex's narration.

DEX

This naming function elevates man over the rest of Creation. Here's Adam, bumped up from the back rows, a good-looking guy, full head of hair, you can't beat that, and he owes it all to one revolutionary, K-Tel appliance. This here amazing gadget is a tool, but it's so convenient, it's not even a tool that you have to physically carry around and mess up your gear. The beauty part about language is that man can deal with concepts and ideas that aren't in the immediate moment, projecting backwards and forwards in time and to other locations.

Dex winces as there is a loud knock at the door.

ASIA

(brightly)

Someone at the door, Mr. Dex.

DEX

Asia, the INCREDIBLY obvious we can do for ourselves. I'll let you know when we need your help with the MERELY obvious.

We hear more knocking.

ASIA

Okay, but it's Oneroff and Mrs. Greenblatt.

DEX

(muttering)

Five advanced degrees and fifty years of teaching between them and they still don't know better than to interrupt a rolling classroom. Do that Dex thing you do, Damien. I'll be right back.

DAMIEN

(impersonating Dex)

Thanks to language, man can plan his activities in other dimensions than the present moment. He comes upon some woolly behemoth and he doesn't have to kill it all by his lonesome with a pointy stick; he

(MORE)

DAMIEN (cont'd)
 can go get his buds and explain
 the situation, map it out, and
 coordinate a group attack. They
 don't even have to eat that
 monster all at once. Thanks to
 the planning function of language,
 he can dry up some of those Slim
 Jims and suck out all that fulsome
 goodness until--who knows when?
 The clock is still running on some
 of that dried shit.

CUT TO

INT. HALLWAY OUTSIDE OF DEX'S CLASSROOM - DAY

DEX
 Morning. How may I help you?

RUTHIE
 (chirpily)
 What's going on in there, Mr.
 Matherson? They can hear you
 through the ceiling on the floor
 below.

DEX
 We're rehearsing a skit the
 students put together, the
 culmination of our 'Genesis' unit.
 Come back tomorrow and see the
 final product.

ONEROFF
 'Genesis'--the Bible? Oh, we
 can't teach religion in a public
 school, Mr. Matherson. Stick to
 the standard curriculum.

DEX
 It's not religion--it's
 LITERATURE. The Bible is the most
 important literary influence on
 the English canon. Anyway, it IS
 in the standard curriculum.

RUTHIE
 Of course it is. Just be careful,
 and mind the neighbors.

ONEROFF

Yes, be very careful. The school cannot appear to endorse a particular belief.

DEX

Trust in me. Declan Matherson--for the unleavened experience of a lifetime.

RUTHIE

We'll let you get back inside then. It's a little loud in there, isn't it?

DEX

Not to worry. I have the situation under control.

The ladies leave. Dex turns and discovers he's locked out.

CUT TO

INT. DEX'S CLASSROOM - DAY

Dex watches the actors through the pane in the door, narrating what he doesn't hear.

DEX

The story of Adam and Eve gaining knowledge is a powerful lesson on the distinguishing ability of language. Before the snake sends Eve and her mate on the road to full-fledged humanity, our ancestors lacked awareness of themselves. They were the same as every other beast or creature in the Garden. They were just two-footed features in the landscaping. The slithering snake that talks is an emblem of consciousness, the endless, withering stream of individual thought that distinguishes man from mere animals and a single person from the rest of humanity.

Asia admits Dex. Daunte slips inside through the opening.

ASIA

I saw you were locked out earlier,
but I didn't let you in because
you were mean to me.

DEX

And you were perfectly justified,
Asia. You correctly applied what
we call a 'normal social
consequence.' I regret my
sarcasm.

ASIA

That's okay. You still my
favorite teacher.

DEX

(doing Bogart)

Thank you, sweetheart.

Daniel and Tiffany-Brittany bask a moment in stage
couplehood, angering Bododeo, who glowers. Students begin
to remove costumes.

TIFFANY-BRITTANY

Dex, are you really going to make
us write an essay on this stuff?

DEX

Yo! Yo! Juliet Prowse. How's it
goin', eh? Of course there's a
writing component. This is an
English class.

TIFFANY-BRITTANY

I thought our excellent play was
instead of writing. I don't do
essays.

DEX

I'm guessing, of course, but, this
being an English class, not being
able to write could be a handicap.
Have courage, T.B. I know you can
do it.

TIFFANY-BRITTANY

Mr. Schneider in history lets us
do skits or posters instead of
essays. Why don't you do that?

DEX

With all due respect, Mr. Schneider shows three movies a week instead of making college-bound juniors read. All that alternative bungola has its place, but this is a class in the written word. We appreciate your dancing prowess--you will get credit for it and nice costume, by the way--but the only work that earns an 'A' in Dex's class is work I can rest a coffee mug on.

Dex sips from an extra large Foghorn Leghorn mug.

BODODEO

(loudly, to Daniel)

I saw you checking out my girl.
Imma proteck wha's mine, doughboy!

DAMIEN

(intervening)

It's a play. He was playing Eve's husband. It's just a play.

DEX

Bododeo, take your seat immediately. Must you antagonize everyone in the class?

BODODEO

(retreating, he
hisses)

I've got my eye on you!

DEX

Here's your next assignment, scholars. Using the Biblical story of the origins of Man and consciousness, I want you to write about your own beginnings with words and language. Write about the process by which you carved out your own existence separate from the rest of the species, the essential names you called yourself and the essential labels you applied to everything else, like Adam naming the ferns and fauna. I want you to describe the streaming serpent of consciousness in your own shiny apple. What does it say to you? Describe its

(MORE)

DEX (cont'd)
seductive voice.

TIFFANY-BRITTANY
I don't have a snake in my head.
Can I put that down, for the snake
part?

DEX
You don't have a consciousness, a
thin small voice in your head? So,
you do admit that. If you don't
have a thought in your head, isn't
it best to make something up and
act like you do?

Sitting at the cluttered desk, Dex trains an eight-inch fan
at himself. Rising, Daunte successfully tosses a ball of
paper into the wastebasket from twenty feet distant.

DEX
I would grumble about that display
of gym behavior in my class,
Daunte, but I am resigned to the
fact that this is probably as
close to a pre-writing exercise as
I'm ever going to get from you.
Incidentally, for coming late to
class, you lose forty points.

DAUNTE
Okay, Dex.

Dex records the demerit in his laptop. Daunte sits. Dex
observes a flurry of unscholarly activity from LaRoger.
Flashing anger, he begins down the aisle.

DEX
(overlooking
James' paper)
What's wrong with that first
sentence, James?

JAMES
I dunno.

DEX
Yes you do, because we've gone
over it a dozen times. It
violates one of the Ten
Commandments of Good Writing. 'I
am writing about how I learned
about language.' What's wrong with
(MORE)

DEX (cont'd)
that? Look at the chart.

James refers to a cardboard cut-out of Charlton Heston as Moses carrying writing tips on two stone tablets.

JAMES
Is it 'Don't narrate the writing process'?

DEX
(as Jim Backus)
Yes! Precocious lad! Here's a 100 Dex-tra Credits for you, my boy!

Dex hands James a note of classroom currency with Halle Berry's picture in the cameo window. James' affect remains neutral.

DEX
Whoa! Look at that hounddog face! Don't take it so hard, kid. Swing, baby, you're platinum! Students, the fact that you are getting up on your little hind legs to write an essay is all too obvious to the reader. He has the evidence scrawled in your handwriting under his nose. We know you are writing--get on with it!

Over LaRoger's shoulder we see the graffiti tag he's been practicing in lieu of the assignment.

DEX
What are you writing, Whalley? This essay is one, tarted-up word long--your name--and I have all I need of that in my rollbook.

LAROGER
It ain't no corny essay.

DEX
Oh, it's not, is it? Then where is it--the assignment you should be working on? (He starts to toss LaRoger's materials.) Is this it? No, that's not it. Is this?

LAROGER

Hey, you fucking faggot! Ge' offa my stuff!

DEX

You suh--- What did you call me?

LAROGER

You a fag, always newsing after guys.

DEX

(in LaRoger's face)

Wrong! I'm always after pathetic losers who can't put a single, intelligible thought to paper!

With an air of imperturbable calm, LaRoger kicks over the Ten Commandments cut-out.

DEX

Wha? Get the hell out of my class!

Dex grabs LaRoger by the collar. LaRoger rises and grabs Dex by the throat. Students hustle to get out of the way. The two glower, stalemated. Daniel steps between them.

DANIEL

Whoa! Dex! Back off, man! You don't want to go there.

Dex moves back a step, and LaRoger releases his grip.

DANIEL

(to LaRoger)

Time out, dude! You should leave. It's not worth it.

LaRoger slowly gathers his gear, and leaves. Dex returns to his desk and sits, hunching forward. With the desk obscuring our view, we see him add something to the Foghorn Leghorn mug from a bottom drawer and then spike that with warm soda from a two-liter bottle. He gulps as the classroom breaks into relieved chatter.

CUT TO

INT. SCHNOCKLEY'S CLAM HOUSE - NIGHT

Dex enters the dining room of a seafood bar in South Philadelphia, still carrying his King James Bible. He spots

Cathy, his estranged wife, at a table, drinking a vodka martini. She is the only black person in the restaurant.

DEX

Hello, Bubbie!

CATHY

Hi.

Dex tries to kiss Cathy on the mouth, but she offers only her cheek.

DEX

What a great place! I wonder we never came here before--so close to our house. Look on the walls! Plastic food! I love plastic food! A swordfish. There's always a swordfish.

CATHY

I wanted to come here plenty of times, but you begged off. Too busy, too cheap, or just afraid of the waiters.

DEX

We're here now, and I love it!

WAITRESS

Are you ready to order?

DEX

What about it, Bubbie? Do you know what you want?

CATHY

I ordered already. You're paying, right? I already ordered.

DEX

Okay. So, I'll have a big ol' bowl of New England-style clam chowder and a half-dozen oysters. Great! It's really nice to see you.

CATHY

I know it is.

DEX

Can I ask you something? Why the hell aren't we living together? Why'd I ever move out?

CATHY

You promised not to talk about relationship stuff, or I'm leaving.

DEX

Sure, no relationship stuff, but, it's just that, I love you, you love me--why the hell aren't we together?

CATHY

That's it! I'm out of here.

DEX

No, no! Don't go! I'll change the topic, I promise.

CATHY

I'm warning you. Last chance.

DEX

Which kind of clam chowder has the cream in it? I think I ordered wrong.

CATHY

No big deal. Tell the waitress.

DEX

No. She put it in already. I hate to be a bother. I'll be fine with whatever she brings.

CATHY

Here we go. Same old thing. Man, traumatized by wait staff in youth, doomed to unsatisfactory entrees and over-tipping.

DEX

Now, see, that's the Freudian model, which I reject: an archetypal event in the past foretells the future. The soup is fine. Don't bug me about it.

CATHY

Swear on the Bible that you don't care one way or the other if there's cream in your chowder. What are you carrying this around for anyway? Run out of copies of 'Watchtower'?

DEX

School. 'Genesis,' today. 'In the big inning..' Wait! My work: another verboten topic.

CATHY

You're paying for dinner. I'll make an exception. What did you do at school, today, Declan?

DEX

Is this one of your lawyerish traps, getting me to talk about teaching because it will confirm your low opinion of my career?

CATHY

What I think depends on how you tell the tale. Sell it to me. Are you a winner or a loser?

DEX

Now, you're talking 'story grammar,' the indelible cues in any tale that anticipate its conclusion. The inevitable triumph of the righteous and horrific fall of the low-lives and nobodies.

The waitress returns with soup and two plates of shellfish.

DEX

Just what I wanted. It's November, and I'm leading the class through my annual bit on The King James Bible. My lesson plans are on file in the English department, but those forms don't cover a half of what I do. Mine is an improvisational art, befitting the kind of student we serve today. The only way to get 'em to read 'Genesis' is to serve it up under onerous layers of

(MORE)

DEX (cont'd)
stagecraft and showbiz.

Dex has waved his arm so excitedly, his wristwatch catches on the long hair of a nearby female diner, who scowls as he disentangles himself, muttering apologies. He tastes his soup approvingly.

DEX
My ga-ba-gool on the Book of Genesis has King James' English and body English all down the line. I did more with a handclap or a finger snap than could be found in ten lesson plans. I was trumpeting about the inventor of language extemporaneously because that was the only way to sell it.

He smacks his palm on the table, nearly launching his soup into the air. Cathy moves it from reach.

DEX
This is the state of teaching at the dawn of the new century, a damned breathless puppet show just to get Prince Curlew or Zhar'ina with an apostrophe to do their frickin' homework. Your modern teacher is a motivational speaker, not an academic, selling one of those gadgets that makes an endless garnish out of potato peels. A kid nods out on his desk and it's my fault for not keeping his flitting, flea-brained attention.

CATHY
Take it easy, Dex. You're frightening the other diners.

DEX
(addressing an
infant at the
next table)
Me, I give 'em the ol' Lenny Bruce. Look, Prince, these are the jokes, okay? It doesn't get any better than this. You want my T and A routine? All right, I'll tell you where it's at with T and A. That chick in the second row
(MORE)

DEX (cont'd)
has a great set of cans.

The infant gurgles delight as his parents look on in horror.

CATHY
You would never actually say that,
would you?

DEX
(launching broth)
That's the beauty part! There's
no telling what I might say! The
whole thing with instruction today
is appealing to the various
intelligences kids have now: your
spatial intelligence, your
interpersonal intelligence, your
finger-up-the-bum intelligence.
Not good enough was the approach
of my old high school English
teacher to 'Crime and Punishment',
which was to, one, make us read
it, and, two, make us write about
it. How insensitive to rows and
rows of tactile learners was that?
Mr. Yucks, the best teacher in my
old high school, couldn't teach
what's for lunch to the kids we
got in schools today.

The waitress delivers a big lobster as Dex sips soup.

CATHY
You're awfully revved up, aren't
you? What happened today? You
were teaching 'Genesis'...

DEX
I gripped up a kid. Actually
grabbed him around the neck with
both hands.

CATHY
Oh, no! Dex! You weren't fired,
were you?

DEX
I had a meeting with the vice
principal and the boy's parent.
Paper was generated, platitudes
expressed, but Matherson is still
on the case.

CATHY

Thank God! I'm not going to support you, you know. The moral of the story is: Don't touch the students!

DEX

I'm not always in control of myself, as you know. Why hasn't someone invented a pulse or alpha-wave-sensing monitor that emits a Klaxon blast just before a guy loses it? Eighty cents worth of hardware so I can back off from the shameful edge before it's too late. I guess it's pretty shocking: I throttled a three-hundred pound idiot.

CATHY

You didn't tell me the kid was overweight. That makes him less sympathetic.

DEX

I know, right? Is it really that bad? Tossing the miscreants out by the collar--it's one of the oldest tropes in literature.

CATHY

So is the basically good person living on a steam vent. There's no excuse for you, Dex! Your first responsibility--I know you know this--is to maintain safety in the classroom, protect students from harm. Instead, you put this job you love in jeopardy, coming on to a hopeless illiterate like just another buck with antlers.

DEX

I thought this was going to be a fun-type meeting.

CATHY

Meeting, yes. I have to know how you finessed this with the vice principal and angry parent.

DEX

Less than an hour after my teeny little brush with child abuse, Oneroff calls me to her office. LaRoger Whalley's mom, a Mrs. Castor, is already there. The kid probably called her outside my classroom door, and she came running. Where was she during the real crisis--when it turned out her high-school-aged son couldn't read or write? No alarm went off for that catastrophe, but a teacher gets a tad physical with her baby humpback, and mama whale zooms to the scene.

Hey, look! I found this playing card on the way to the office--a nine of spades!

CATHY

You and those found cards. I've never in my life seen a playing card on the ground, yet you have complete decks of them. What's this one mean?

DEX

Oh, well, nine of swords, the most unambiguously evil card in the deck, bold predictor of pain, affliction, and sentence fragments.

DISSOLVE

INT. ONEROFF'S OFFICE - DAY

DEX

(voice-over)

Anyway, Oneroff's office is this converted broom closet. And--go figure--Mrs. Castor is as big as her son. I have to literally squeeze in, no room to sit down. I swear, the Castor woman actually snarls at me. On one side, her mustachioed lip curls back to reveal a gold-capped canine. I think she's snarling, though to be fair, some forms of maxillary surgery, especially when

(MORE)

DEX (cont'd)
 self-performed, can result in
 nerve damage and bizarre tics. I
 know this for a fact.

Cathy, you had to see this woman.
 Tufts of hair like dry brush
 shooting out every whicha way. Her
 big head is shaped like a mace.
 And she's wearing those ghetto
 flip-flops, you know, where she's
 squashing the back part of her
 shoes with her cracked heels. I
 mean, her biscuits is showing.

ONEROFF
 Here's Mr. Matherson.

DEX
 Good morning.

Mrs. Castor grunts inarticulately.

ONEROFF
 (flatly)
 Mrs. Castor is here because she is
 understandably concerned by the
 incident involving LaRoger and
 yourself in class, today. I want
 to clarify what took place.

DEX
 Of course.

ONEROFF
 I've interviewed LaRoger. Why
 don't you give us your version of
 events?

DEX
 Forgive me for not possessing the
 word-by-word recall one finds in
 first person novels, but in broad
 outline, the student called me a
 faggot, apparently confusing my
 interest in his academic advance
 with a carnal interest in himself.
 I was enraged by his use of the
 disgustingly low pejorative.

ONEROFF
 You admit you lost your temper.

DEX

Absolutely. I was engorged. Not only do I find the word 'faggot' personally disgusting and disrespectful to my class, but it is the policy of the Philadelphia School District that a teacher must prohibit any such bias against a particular sexual orientation. LaRoger's use of the word was as offensive as, well, as would be my calling him a 'nigger.'

MRS. CASTOR

Damn you, mister! Damn if I si' here an' lissen to some Pilsbury bastid call my child a nigger. I go' frens dow'town, an I ma tell 'em all abou' you an' thi' whole racis' schoo', don' thin' I won'!

ONEROFF

Try to remain calm, Mrs. Castor. Mr. Matherson did not call LaRoger a name. He was using a rather vivid comparison, but he never actually committed the offense. You misunderstood.

MRS. CASTOR

Wha' 'bout' him grippin' up my son? Tha's a lawsuit, righ' there, an' there ain' no misunnastan'in' bout' dat!

ONEROFF

That is our biggest concern. Yes. Mr. Matherson, did you grab the young man by the throat and tear this button off his collar?

DEX

(hypnotized by the
suspended button)

I did grab him by the collar, my intention being to help him out of the room, but I don't know anything about that button. My memory of my students' individual clothing choices this morning is incomplete.

ONEROFF

Regardless of anything the student may have done to incite you, Mr. Matherson, there can be no doubt laying a hand on him was wrong.

DEX

I certainly agree. I mention how angry I was, not to excuse myself, but to assure Mrs. Castor this physical brand of teaching is not what I would do in a rational frame of mind.

ONEROFF

Mr. Matherson admits he lay hands on your son. It is an intolerable breach of professionalism. Additionally, as LaRoger's position in the class has been compromised, we will promptly process his request to transfer to another English section.

MRS. CASTOR

Rog ax for a transfer? Nuh-uh, Miz Oneroff. He stay righ' war he be. Dis man da bes' English teachuh y'all got, and my son go'n to hab 'im. Ah won' le' youse moob my boy.

ONEROFF

Will this be acceptable to you, Mr. Matherson? Can you repair your relationship with the student?

DEX

LaRoger is in danger of failing the whole marking period. He hasn't turned in any work all year.

MRS. CASTOR

Whaddya mean he ain' done no wor'? Show me da wor' he ain' done!

DEX

(doing Groucho)
Ayyiee!

ONEROFF

Mr. Matherson says LaRoger has missing work. This means the current essay assignment has doubled importance.

MRS. CASTOR

I know all 'bou' dat essay 'signmen'. How he gib wor' 'bout the Bible an' he jus a teachuh, anyways? Wha' 'bou' sta's of separations from chu'ch? How he gonna bring his puhsonal beleeps inna class like dat?

ONEROFF

Mr. Matherson's lesson plans are on file in the English office. We will review them to determine if they are appropriate for the District curriculum.

CUT TO

INT. SCHNOCKLEY'S CLAM HOUSE - NIGHT

Cathy signals the waitress. Dex eats from the remainder of his shellfish and soup.

CATHY

Two coffees and a cheescake. Say what you will about teaching the Bible as part of your students' preparedness for other works in the canon, you and I know teaching it satisfies your own deity complex. And then there's your irrational need to constantly put your career in danger.

DEX

I can't refute that.

CATHY

You and Oneroff ought to be ashamed of yourselves for bullying that poor woman. You manipulated the facts to put the best face on your clearly actionable behaviors.

Cathy feeds Dex and prepares his coffee as he speaks.

DEX

I don't condone what I did. The worst part is how damned entertaining it is for the students to see their teacher lose it. I'd have no justification, except that I am what Mrs. Castor said I am: the best hope her kid has.

CATHY

What hope does she have against your pack of bureaucrats, you mean.

DEX

And don't I point that out to my classes each and every day as a rationale for learning to speak the King's English? We who can deploy and enunciate the right verbs and adjectives control what passes for the truth. I'd never lose my temper at all, if the stakes weren't that high. We tell students education is the difference between having a life and being swept away with the trash. My problem is I really believe it.

The diners are finishing and the waitress returns with the check.

CATHY

Can you really deal with that LaRoger kid for the rest of the year? Maybe you should have insisted on his transfer.

DEX

I have to deal with it. I offered to teach him one-on-one after school tomorrow.

Cathy rises and gives Dex a kiss on the brow.

CATHY

Thanks for the dinner, Bubbie. Don't beat yourself up too much about this. Remember: just because a teacher abuses a student doesn't make them a bad person.

Cathy exits. Dex pats several wrong pockets in his jacket looking for his wallet.

FADE OUT

INT. DEX'S CLASSROOM - DAY

FADE IN

LaRoger works at a desk next to Dex's. The teacher is in the beam of his personal fan, sipping regularly from his Foghorn Leghorn mug.

DEX

You're doing a good job staying on task. For working on your essay on personal language, you earn 500 points.

LaRoger records points in the positive column of a point sheet.

DEX

What you're doing now, LaRoger, is following instructions to record points, but you didn't give me eye contact or say okay. When you do that, I feel dehumanized. For not acknowledging my instructions, you lose 200 points.

LAROGER

(looking at Dex)

Okay!

DEX

Good job accepting my feedback. When you do that, I have confidence that you'll put into practice all the teaching I'm giving you on constructing your essay. You earn a positive 500 points for following instructions.

LaRoger gives all the skill components of accepting feedback.

LAROGER

Okay. Can I ax a question, Dex? Why'm I on points it isn' eben class? This point sheet is so corny.

DEX

The only way I'll work with you, LaRoger, is with a point sheet that graphically displays your positive and negative behaviors. In my experience with you, this is the only way you'll understand exactly the progress you're making, or not making, and the only way you'll understand what's in your own best interest.

LAROGER

But asseptin' fee'back and followin' instruction ain't eben writin' my frickin' essay. But they's all you eber ta' abou'.

DEX

I'm teaching you the basic skills one needs before you'll ever master a complicated task like writing an essay. The fact that you never learned properly how to follow instructions prior to coming to my class is the reason you aren't passing it. That's good feedback for you...

LAROGER

Okay.

DEX

Here's a 100-point, Halle Berry, Dex-tra Credit for accepting my feedback.

He hands LaRoger a note of classroom currency.

LAROGER

Bangin'!

DEX

Abstract thinking comes late to most people, if at all. They need concrete tokens to assess where they are, or they falter. But make no mistake, every human act has specific consequences, even when we don't know what they are.

LaRoger is filling in all the o's on his point sheet. He plays with his nose.

DEX

For instance, in class today, you slept soundly, despite meeting with the vice principal yesterday, despite the meeting I had with your mom, despite the importance of you doing well on the current assignment. This is the behavior of a person who lacks the ability to perceive his own best interest without graphic signposts. There's ignorance, LaRoger, and there's willful ignorance--and that's a sin against the sacred compact of universal, free education!

LaRoger embellishes his name at the top of the point sheet, not listening.

DEX

(sighs)

You need to earn 5000 points on the card to get an 'A' on your essay, and I figure with all this other teaching, you're up by 500. Don't be discouraged. You'll earn positive points more rapidly once you start putting ideas on paper.

What you need to do now is write down a number of ways that language has shaped you as a person. Or even how you have shaped language. Do you get that, LaRoger?

LAROGER

Li', how I go' my name?

DEX

Yes! That's an instance of language shaping you. How do you relate to that unusual moniker of yours. It's a doozy. How do you feel about it? When you approach people, fronting your 'LaRoger' placard for all to see, are your actions affected by the specific vibe that name emits? I'm sure they are!

LaRoger looks uncertain.

DEX

Anyway, that's a paragraph or two on your name. Then, you need to write about the personal language you grew up with. What were the key labels you hung on your environment? How did you describe the people in your life? What feat of language tied everything together to express your essential reason for living? Is this clear LaRoger?

LAROGER

Wha' lang'age did I use. I ge' it, I ge' it.

Dex gulps hard from his mug. He picks up a backpack and rises.

DEX

I'm going down the hall a few minutes. Keep working.

LAROGER

Oh-kay!

DEX

Good job acknowledging instructions! Write a positive 200 points on your tally.

LAROGER

Okay, Dex.

CUT TO

INT. HALLWAY OUTSIDE OF DEX'S CLASSROOM - DAY

Dex walks down the hall twenty-five feet to a door marked "Men Teachers Only." He tries his key, but it won't turn. He yanks hard on the knob, which pulls off in his hand, but the door gasps open. Grabbing the door by its edge, he replaces the knob. He opens the door fully.

DEX

(as Popeye)

Clever rascules! Ah gi-gi-gi!
Smoking lounge for studentsks.
Hide the evidence, eh?

Dex rolls a greasy substance from the door frame on his fingers. We see a wet, rolled up towel on the floor. Dex sniffs and winces.

DEX
 (Popeye mumbling)
 Oooh-wee! Sealing the door frame,
 young'usks. Ah gi-gi-gi!

Dex unzips the backpack and pulls out a cylinder we can't fully see before he disappears into the water closet. We hear the signature rattle of a shaken spray paint can and then its hissing.

FADE OUT

INT. DEX'S CLASSROOM - DAY

Wakeem and Daniel are talking to LaRoger as Dex returns.

DANIEL
 Yeah, sure, Rog. That's Dex's
 whole deal.

WAKEEM AND DANIEL
 Look at the person. Say 'Okay.'
 Follow instructions.

DANIEL
 'What you are doing now is not
 accepting my feedback.' It's like
 Dex's catch phrase. He says it
 about a hunnert times a day.

WAKEEM
 You don' even need' to agree wi'
 him. Jus' ack like you' lis'nin'.

DEX
 Gentlemen. Good to see you both.
 Now get out of here.

WAKEEM
 No pro'lem, Dex. We jus' lookin'
 af'er ou' young bul', heah. Later,
 man. Assep' Des's fee'back.

Wakeem and Daniel exit. Dex looks at LaRoger's paper.

DEX
 How'd you do? 'It comes from my
 aunt. It's not pronounced that
 way. French.' That's it? Fifteen
 (MORE)

DEX (cont'd)
 minutes and you have two
 incomplete thoughts on paper? You
 shouldn't have wasted time with
 Daniel and Wakeem.

LAROGER
 They be was 'in' time wit' me.

DEX
 What you're doing now is not
 accepting my feedback. When you
 don't acknowledge that our time is
 valuable, you make it less likely
 that I'll invest my free afternoon
 tutoring you. For not accepting my
 feedback, you lose 200 points.

LAROGER
 You sa' I woul' ge' mad poin's fo'
 workin'. Now, you gon' pu' me in
 da ho' again. I's no' fair, Dex.

DEX
 What you're doing now is not
 accepting my feedback about not
 accepting my feedback. You lose
 500 points. Say 'okay' and write
 it down.

LAROGER
 You mi's well gi' me ten thousan'
 negatives. I nee's a break. I
 gotta go to the can.

DEX
 What you need to do is stop
 wasting our time and finish this
 outline.

LAROGER
 Loo', Dex. I go to the can, then
 I come ba' so you ca' teach me sa'
 mo'.

DEX
 None of the third floor toilets
 work. I'll be waiting a half-hour
 for you to hulk it back here, if
 you come back.

LAROGER
(leering)
Den I use da teachah' can.

LaRoger exits.

CUT TO

INT. HALLWAY OUTSIDE OF DEX'S CLASSROOM - DAY

LaRoger reaches the door to the men's teachers' toilet. Dex calls after him from the door to the classroom.

DEX
You can't get in there. It's
locked.

LaRoger leers. He smacks the door hard with his palm and it opens. Dex approaches. LaRoger enters the WC.

LAROGER
(from inside)
Holy fuck! Stin's li' shi'! Yo,
De's, is you sick or sumfin'?

DEX
(moving quickly)
Yeah, it stinks. Why don't you
shut the door behind you?

Dex shoves the door hard. It crashes against LaRoger's bulk. LaRoger howls. A loud crash precedes a geyser-like eruption. LaRoger moans. Dex races back to his classroom, then re-emerges with a chair. Placing the chair outside the WC door, he climbs up and looks in through the transom.

CUT TO

INT. TOILET - DAY

LaRoger, semi-dazed, has fallen on the toilet, shattering it. Water rises rapidly around him from the broken pipes. The water contains fetid bits and toilet paper globs. The makeshift gasketing of the door by smoking students prevents the water from flowing out of the closet.

CUT TO

INT. HALLWAY OUTSIDE OF DEX'S CLASSROOM - DAY

DEX

I'm sorry but I can't open the door. The knob falls off. That water is rising fast, isn't it? Are you okay?

We hear LaRoger moan.

DEX

Just a second.

Dex goes to the open janitor's closet adjacent. He surveys it, spotting a long-necked funnel. He takes it and climbs back up to look through the transom.

DEX

Oh, snap! I just had an epiphany. What you wrote in your outline. Your name--it's pronounced Lah-ro-zhay, isn't it, like the thesaurus. French! I've mispronounced you hundreds of times. Why didn't you correct me? My advice is always use complete sentences so people won't mistake your meaning.

Hey, look. I can't stay any longer. I've got to stop at the drug store on the way home. But this improvised snorkel should buy you some time.

Dex aims the funnel.

CUT TO

INT. TOILET - DAY

The funnel goes like a dart into LaRoger's open maw.

DEX

Two points!

Fetid matter and water rises over LaRoger's face and up the funnel's shaft.

CUT TO

INT. HALLWAY OUTSIDE OF DEX'S CLASSROOM - DAY

Dex watches through the transom a moment longer. He steps down from the chair and returns it to the classroom. Re-emerging with his coat and backpack, he shuts the classroom door and tests it. He briskly heads down the hallway. After traveling a dozen steps, he obsessively returns to the classroom door, re-tests it, then briskly moves down the empty hallway a second time.

FADE TO BLACK

INT. DEX'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Dex reads student papers in a twin bed among a midden of unpacked cardboard boxes, books, and newspaper. A TV leans on the overturned box it was bought in.

DEX

'My name is "Zofya", a Muslim variant of "Sophia" and a bane to new teachers and classmates. Each year I defend anew its contrariness and the difference between its cranky appearance and sweet, familiar sound. The five stubborn letters, Z-O-F-Y-A, I have incorporated into myself, stubborn, too, but also devout, devious, mysterious, indignant. We are our own creation.'

Dex hops in bed. He's wearing a "Free Mr. K" tee and boxers. He dances to the floor and sings to the essay.

DEX

'Zofya! I just read your essay, Zofya! And who would guess that you would credibly construe its aim!' Hee-hee-hee-ha-ha-hee!

FADE OUT

INT. ROCKLAND HIGH MAIN OFFICE - DAY

Looking depressed and bedraggled, Dex signs in. The phones are all in use. Oneroff is issuing a statement on one.

ONEROFF

'The students and staff of Rockland High regret very deeply this tragic accident.' Yes, an

(MORE)

ONEROFF (cont'd)
 accident. No, we don't have a coroner's report. There were no signs of foul play...Yes, in the teachers' john. Let me start again. 'The students and staff of Rockland High regret very deeply this tragic accident, the death of one of its own...'

RUTHIE
 Dex, have you heard? There's been a tragedy.

Dex takes a letter from his mail cubby.

DEX
 What?

RUTHIE
 LaRoger Whalley drowned in the teachers' rest room by your class. A pipe burst and he couldn't get the door open from the inside. The cleaning woman found the body and about five thousand gallons of water and sewage that swept her off her feet.

DEX
 My God! Are you serious? Someone swept outside my class!

RUTHIE
 Yes, I know. It's a great shock. Dex, are you okay? You've spilled something down your front, haven't you?

DEX
 Cup holder malfunction. Late night. Reading many papers. My end-of-the-marking-period crush. Tired. I'm tired.

RUTHIE
 I've told you before: never assign more work than you can grade in a prep period, and avoid assigning anything that can't be graded mechanically. That written work you give? What's the point? Students can't write before you assign it, and they still can't

(MORE)

RUTHIE (cont'd)
write afterwards.

DEX
Also, 'Once an "A" student, always
an "A" student.' That's been very
helpful.

RUTHIE
I didn't know him, but you had
LaRoger in your section. Are you
sure you're all right?

DEX
I'm overwhelmed. I don't know what
to say.

RUTHIE
Of course, classes are canceled,
and the counseling department is
preparing a response for kids and
faculty who find it difficult to
cope. There's to be a memorial
assembly in the auditorium at
noon. I'm arranging things. I was
hoping, since you knew the young
man, you would say a few words.
Half the student body will be
there.

DEX
And the other half lies in the
hall outside my class. Ruthie, I
have to excuse myself. I can't
speak at LaRoger's memorial.

RUTHIE
Why not? He was in your class,
wasn't he?

DEX
LaRoger and I had an, er, incident
in class two days ago. Ended up
in Oneroff's office, his mom came
down, big party. It would be
inappropriate for me to sing the
boy's praises at his memorial. I
can't imagine what his mother
would think if I did.

RUTHIE
I know all about it. I got a copy
of that reprimand in your mailbox.
Grabbing the kid around the neck
(MORE)

RUTHIE (cont'd)
 doesn't exclude you from
 eulogizing him. Think of it as a
 form of penance.

DEX
 No, I'm sorry. I can't do it.

RUTHIE
 Not even as a favor to me?...Fine.
 LaRoger had other teachers.
 Somebody must be able to say a
 sentence or two about him.

Ruthie hurries on. Dex looks at the school envelop
 containing his reprimand and tosses it in the wastebasket.

FADE OUT

INT. DEX'S CLASSROOM - DAY

FADE IN

We see the empty class, but not the teacher. A wall clock
 reads, "10:30." Suddenly, a pounding on the door is
 accompanied by a strong male voice.

DET. GUTTYPERCH
 Mr. Matherson? Mr. Declan
 Matherson?

DEX
 (under desk)
 Just a minute.

Dex pops up from under the desk and brushes his clothes off
 before admitting the visitor.

DEX
 May I help you?

DET. GUTTYPERCH
 Detective Guttyperch from the PPD.
 Did I wake you?

DEX
 No, no. They told me to expect
 you.

Dex sits at his desk. Guttyperch squeezes into a too small,
 seat/desk combo.

DET. GUTTYPERCH
I sympathize with you for the loss
of your student, Mr. Matherson.

DEX
Yes, yes. The whole thing is
absolutely shocking.

DET. GUTTYPERCH
Figures to hit you hard, a
terrible accident just down the
hall. Mr. Whalley was one of your
juniors, is that right?

DEX
A bigger mystery than his death is
how he ever passed sophomore
English.

DET. GUTTYPERCH
Oh? You didn't find him to be a
capable student, then?

DEX
I wonder how he lived to be
seventeen without drowning in the
toilet long before this.

DET. GUTTYPERCH
It's like that, is it? Was there
an argument between yourself and
the young man recently?

DEX
Two days ago. But you can hardly
call it an argument. I don't argue
with teenagers. I teach them over
their objections.

DET. GUTTYPERCH
Listen, Matherson. I want to tell
you I admire what you do. I've
interviewed a dozen of your
students, and the typical opinion
is that you're the best English
teacher they've ever had.

DEX
That's gratifying. Thank you.

DET. GUTTYPERCH
In my line we understand how
important a motivating school
experience is for these young
(MORE)

DET. GUTTYPERCH (cont'd)
people. This city's dropout rate is an astounding 50 percent. A good teacher changes the odds. And especially with you being an English teacher. I read the classics myself: Homer, Cervantes, the divine Dante; Poe and Wilkie Collins. I believe an appreciation of literature and a life of vagrant criminality are incompatible.

DEX
The dickens you say.

DET. GUTTYPERCH
That would be 'Faust'. A bargain with the devil.

DEX
I've made mine. I teach more pre-scholarly skills than literature, start more books than we finish. I make 'em into students when I can. Maybe somewhere down the road someone will teach them literature.

DET. GUTTYPERCH
This paper with Whalley's name on it, is this an example of laying the foundations for more literate studies: 'What does my name mean?'

DEX
That's right. LaRoger and the others need to understand that they inhabit the language they use. We are language-borne creatures, bound by our own thoughts. LaRoger was technically dead before he became literally dead.

DET. GUTTYPERCH
That's a mighty harsh assessment.

DEX
You said yourself, the stakes are high in this profession. To the degree that I understand the value of literacy, I'm a good teacher.

DET. GUTTYPERCH

Witnesses say you had your hands around LaRoger's throat the other day. What was that about?

DEX

Whalley's disregard for the work of the class and his ease with his own ignorance had me pretty steamed. I'm sorry for it. Hurts like hell when they see how angry they can get you.

DET. GUTTYPERCH

So, you tried to choke the kid the day before he drowned in the can. Did you do anything else to try and show him who's boss? What about yesterday? I suppose yesterday's class was the last time you saw him alive.

DEX

No, the last time I saw LaRoger was just minutes before he died, in late afternoon. I was giving him extra help on the essay his truculence prevented him from writing in class. That was from three-fifteen until just after four.

DET. GUTTYPERCH

This is news to me. Just before he died, you say? Besides him drowning, how did that work out?

DEX

Look at this pitiful result. He wants to say something about the origin of his own name, but the sum of his self-awareness is a mere fragment.

DET. GUTTYPERCH

Maybe you expected too much from a teenager.

DEX

The meta-cognitive component is there, but it needs development. We all have a fiction that guides our lives. We trade in them constantly, negotiating between

(MORE)

DEX (cont'd)
our own and the fictions of
others. It's in your 'Don
Quixote.' Even police detectives
have a story map they follow.

DET. GUTTYPERCH
Oh, really.

DEX
I might imagine you had a younger
brother with whom you played cops
and robbers, and as the eldest,
you insisted on playing the cop.
Big brother wants to show the kid
how the good guys behave.

DET. GUTTYPERCH
Oh, really. What else?

Guttyperch extricates himself from the seat contraption and
stands to admire the "Ten Commandments" cut-out.

DEX
Hmm. Let's see. Your Dad started
drinking pretty regular. He beat
your mother and beat up on you,
too--a few times. It got so bad,
you thought you'd have to run
away, but Da' fell asleep on the
sidewalk during the coldest night
in November and froze to death by
morning.

Guttyperch stiffens.

DEX
After that, whenever you came
across a description of a
policeman, you measured those
words against the words you used
to describe yourself. Since you
were 14, determined to protect the
remains of your family, you could
never have become anything but a
cop.

DET. GUTTYPERCH
(irritated)
This is the kind of stuff kids
write about in your English class?

DEX

It would be if I could ever once get them to stop swapping farts or cooking their snot on the radiator.

DET. GUTTYPERCH

How did you and Whalley separate after this extra help session?

DEX

LaRoger whined that he needed to use the bathroom, and I told him I wouldn't wait for him to come back. He left anyway and so did I. This morning I discovered the consequences of these behaviors.

DET. GUTTYPERCH

Do you have any idea how he got into the teachers' mensroom?

DEX

He walked right in; it's not secure. We see evidence all the time that rooms on this floor are frequented by students without permission. They go in and out of classrooms at will, smoke, do drugs, engage in trysts, but we never catch anyone.

DET. GUTTYPERCH

Do you recognize this graphic?

Guttyperch produces a photograph of an emblem, spray-painted on a wall.

DEX

What an odd, little drawing. I haven't seen anything of this nature. We get more conventional tags, students' street names blown up in flamboyant, home-cooked fonts.

DET. GUTTYPERCH

That calling card was recently spray-painted in the broken restroom. We found the three cans of paint the artist used to make it. Whoever drew this design could be connected to the Whalley kid. (rising) That's it for now, Mr.

(MORE)

DET. GUTTYPERCH (cont'd)
Matherson. Let me know if you
think of anything else that bears
on our investigation.

DEX
It was an accident, right? My job
is hard enough without me worrying
that Rockland High has a killer on
the loose, some exotic ape--

DET. GUTTYPERCH
The orangutan in "Murders in the
Rue Morgue," right? We haven't
made a determination, but I'd say
you have nothing to worry about.

DEX
Good to meet you, Detective.

FADE OUT

INT. ROCKLAND HIGH AUDITORIUM - DAY

FADE IN

In the half-full auditorium, the memorial service has
started. The school chorus is singing "Frosty the Snowman"
as a dirge. Attendees are rowdy and expressive, crying or
cheering. Dex is on the side, in the aisle. Student teacher
Gerald glances at Dex from his seat, then quickly turns
away. Dex pounces on the seat next to him.

DEX
This song always moves me to
tears. Student teacher Gerald!
How's it goin', eh?

GERALD
Uh. Hello, Mr. Matherson.

DEX
You're with Ruthie Greenblatt,
right? Isn't she full of pep?
Woman has a worksheet for
anything. Once gave me a whole
case of "Ta-Keel-A Mockingbird."
For Cinco de Mayo. How's it going
for you?

GERALD

She's very experienced. Thirty years--

DEX

Or one year, thirty times. Let me know if I can help you with anything.

GERALD

(hesitating)

I am a bit worried about classroom management. The students won't listen to me.

DEX

What does Ruthie say?

GERALD

I should just stand next to the student who's off-task and that will bring them back.

DEX

But that only works with some kids. Look, Gerald, you can't stop a cannon by putting your head in the barrel.

GERALD

My Temple professor told me I should pick out a troublemaker, and surreptitiously step on his toes. I haven't tried that yet.

DR. NUXTALL

(sitting down)

You must!

DEX

And the student will unsurreptitiously hand you your ass.

DR. NUXTALL

But it feels so good, right Matherson?

DEX

Do you know Dr. Nuxtall, Gerald? Good morning, Doctor.

DR. NUXTALL

We had a principal once--I've outlasted her--told me to come to a workshop on discipline problems with a mirror. She thought I should look at myself as the reason some goon goes off in class. I told her, 'I'll bring the smoke, and you bring the mirrors.'

DEX

Seriously, Doctor. Advice for our new colleague?

DR. NUXTALL

Yes. The distillation of my decades: 'Do the same thing every day, and don't spook the herd.'

DEX

Moo.

'Frosty the Snowman' ends. Ruthie speaks from a podium.

RUTHIE

..truly a big part of life here at Rockland. A quiet kid..he kept to himself..but was well liked by his friends. Any teacher would feel lucky to have LaRoger work in his class. He made a big impact on this campus. He will be missed.

And now the Rockland Combined Chorus will sing a tribute to our departed friend.

The chorus sings the Diana Ross song "Missing You," but they only know the chorus hook, repeated many times over a background of "ooohs" and uncertain, albeit earnest piano.

SOLOIST

Oooh-wee-oooh, I'm missing you.
Tell me why the road turns.
(Repeated.)

DEX

This student has her diva thing going on. Evidently, she's missing something--the verse.

DR. NUXTALL

It was a much better unit when I sponsored the choir.

DEX

Who can ever forget your famous medley of junk food jingles?

DR. NUXTALL

'Chips From Da Hood' is an under-appreciated classic of the genre.

DEX

(doing Groucho)

I really must be..go-ing. Really. I'm leading an impromptu conference this afternoon on incorporating field trips into your curriculum, giving kids more responsibility for their own education. Maybe I'll see you there.

DR. NUXTALL

Administration can't stand the idea of letting teachers out early. Had to quick come up with another pointless workshop. No offense, Matherson. I'll see you at your dog and pony show if they make me go.

DEX

Gerald! Hang in there!

Dex rises into the aisle. Ruthie Greenblatt leaves the podium, having completed another introduction.

RAPPER

(over a canned
beat)

Whassup, y'all? We're Ace in Da Hole, and dis one goes out to our young bul', LaRoger!
'You surely loved your syrup and your PAN-FRIED snacks! Got Delt Ar-Cee to know us and our CRA-ZY whacks! We love you, our brudder, and to all we avow--Da overweight bruddah in da hee-ous, now! Da overweight bruddah's in da house!'

The students rise out of their seats. A pandemonium of fanny-wiggling, complicated high-fives, and hootery erupts. Dex walks to the rear, where Oneroff is standing.

DEX
Congratulations, Mrs. Oneroff, for
the staff's skilled guidance of
the student body through this
difficult bereavement process.

He exits.

FADE TO BLACK

INT. CATHY'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Cathy is watching TV. The phone rings. She reads from the caller ID.

CATHY
Dex?

DEX
(voice on phone)
It's me...They're dead. They're
all dead.

CATHY
Who is?

DEX
The teachers in my workshop. They
were worse behaved than the
students, they hate school more,
and they give it less chance of
changing lives.

CATHY
Oh, that. You scared me for a
second. I thought something
terrible...Yeah, Dex. You know
this already. That school of yours
is useless. Those teachers: not a
single one of them would send his
own kids there. If you help any of
those children find their way,
it's purely by accident.

DEX
There's a detective who thinks
that's just what I've done.

CATHY

What?

DEX

A person needs to choose whether to teach students or be whittled away by them. I know I expect too much. I keep thinking I could do more, be a better teacher, but I'm too exhausted. Just want to sleep.

CATHY

Sleep is good.

DEX

Will you be able to help me out on this Art Museum trip?

CATHY

I'll be there, Bubbie. December 22, nine o'clock, main entrance.

DEX

Thank you Cathy.

Dex hangs up abruptly. Cathy returns the phone to the cradle. She processes the conversation, head shaking in a narrow range, eyes seeking the left.

FADE OUT

INT. DEX'S CLASSROOM - DAY

FADE IN

Dex observes Tiffany-Brittany leaning out a window. The broken sash requires a dictionary to prop it open. She's talking to someone below as Dex interrupts.

DEX

Tiffany-Brittany! What the hell do you think you're doing?

Tiffany-Brittany is heedless as Dex approaches.

DEX

Kasbar, James, are you watching this? I've just committed the classic adult blunder. No teenager in the history of the world has a satisfactory answer for 'What the hell are you doing?' Observe how my power waxes when I change my

(MORE)

DEX (cont'd)

interrogative into a statement. Briffany! What you are doing now is hanging out the window. Our neighbors will see you and presume they are casting their tax dollars to the wind. For hanging out the window, you lose 100 points. What you need to do is come inside.

Tiffany-Brittany retreats, observing the eyes of the class are upon her.

TIFFANY-BRITTANY

Dang, y'all! You be so newsy!

DEX

Triffany, I realize you are discomfited by the attention your antics are receiving, but what you are doing now is not accepting consequences for risking injury in that broken-sash window. What's worse is the possibility that my dictionary will be harmed through your heedlessness. Students pass through these halls like sand, but a ruined book is lost forever. That's school district policy. You lose 100 points.

TIFFANY-BRITTANY

Oh-kay!

Asia and Zofya pass out texts. Dex makes notations in his laptop. The class records a list of vocabulary words from the blackboard into notebooks: disposal, valuation, rank, sprightly, wretch, profligate, dissipation, disposition, fiendish, barbarity.

DEX

We were reading 'The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass,' where the humanizing power of literacy is alive on every page. Raised from infancy as one might raise a calf or colt, the young slave, Frederick, lacks even the feeling of a son for his mother. He is a brute.

Then, the miracle. The woman of the house, against common sense, teaches Frederick his ABC's. A man

(MORE)

DEX (cont'd)

with letters cannot remain a slave; he will rise up against his masters.

WAKEEM

(interrupting)

Dex! I's Bodie! Make 'im stop! He far'ed! It nasty!

DEX

Wakeem, no childish provocation by that unclean fellow justifies your interruption of the lesson. You lose 100 points.

WAKEEM

Okay.

As he speaks, Dex cuts up two loaves of crusty bread into mouth-sized pieces.

DEX

Douglass understands that literacy is the enemy of slavery and dedicates himself to acquiring it. He secretly gathers up all the books and papers he can find. Each time he is caught reading, the masters whip him mercilessly.

Asia and Zoraida distribute pieces of bread with decorum. Dex theatrically leaps on top of his desk.

DEX

This is the moment you came to class to witness! Attend to what Douglass has done! His means to learn reading is the greatest exploit in American letters: Frederick uses bread, of which his household has plenty, to trade with the little white boys in the Baltimore alleys, exchanging coarse food for the bread of knowledge. He gives them crumbs, and the boys tell Frederick their day's lessons in the white man's school. By this stratagem, he teaches himself to read.

Because he can read and write, he stands out from the ignorant brutes who are so much meat to

(MORE)

DEX (cont'd)

Covey, the slave owner. We contain our reality in the words we use, not in this diseased or scarred flesh. Without the ability to communicate, man is chattel, part of the furniture.

Douglass is authoring his own existence on every level of meaning. Look at the word's root: A-U-T-H: author, authenticate, authority. He is not a low animal poised for slaughter who can write his own story. Douglass fixes his own identity, rejecting a slave label, refusing ever again to be beaten like an obstinate mule. After that, his physical flight to freedom is inevitable.

Students! Your choice is literacy or slavery! An articulated life or a mute and pitiable death! What will you do about it?

An exchange between Tiffany-Brittany and Bododeo in the back of the room creates a stir and brings Dex off the desktop.

DEX

Tiffany-Brittany, what you are doing now is talking without permission. For not showing concern for others you lose 100 points.

TIFFANY-BRITTANY

You know, Dex, wha'evah. I need permission to speak, but you tell me my words will make me free. If my not having authority to speak makes me a slave, than your control over me makes you the slave master.

DEX

What you are doing now is not accepting a consequence. When you don't accept my teaching--

TIFFANY-BRITTANY

I don't care if I lose points! You be the enslaver and we all yo' victims. I don' know how you speak

(MORE)

TIFFANY-BRITTANY (cont'd)
 against Covey like yo' do, when he
 yo' own peeps.

DEX
 What you are doing now is not--
 Wait! I'll engage your argument.
 You think that because the
 sadistic Covey is White, when I
 read the story I have to identify
 with the slaveholder.

TIFFANY-BRITTANY
 Who else you gon' identify wit'?
 You dis big, blue-eyed man pushin'
 poor black kids aroun' with yo'
 damn consequences or suckerin' dem
 wit' yo' worthless Dex-tra
 Credits. You jus' gots to be da
 bad guy in this story!

DEX
 Race is a figment in all of this.
 Douglass says it's ignorance that
 enslaves. The story grammar of the
 narrative requires the reader to
 sympathize with Douglass, who is
 accumulating the power that will
 free him. The reader seizes on
 this immediately--there's no
 application process. I don't have
 to state my race to have the right
 to feel what Douglass is trying to
 communicate.

TIFFANY-BRITTANY
 Your class is racist and fascist!
 You be teaching us in your white
 language we don't understan' these
 white words we ain' evah gon' to
 use!

DEX
 (indicating
 chalkboard)
 These are Douglass' words! They're
 from the 'Narrative.' They're
 Douglass' words!

BLACKOUT

INT. DEX'S CLASSROOM - DAY

FADE IN

DEX

That's five dollars and you both
have seats on the nine o'clock bus
outta Dodge.

ASIA

Is it a charter or a cheese bus,
Dex?

DEX

What difference does it make?

ZORAIDA

It's a cheese bus. We can't be
stylin' if other students see us
leaving the crib in a regular
yellow school bus.

DEX

Don't forget: they'll see you
leaving for one of the great art
collections in the country, led by
one of the great English teachers
in the district. Now, go get in
uniform or the cheese bus will
roll wi'out youse.

ASIA

Uniforms?! Uhg! Do we have to?

DEX

Yes, you do, the better to
represent our beloved Rockland
High in society.

Zoraida and Asia exit.

ZORAIDA

(from doorway)

Only for you, Dex. Only for you.

Tiffany-Brittany enters wearing the blue and white uniform
colors and listening to headphones, which she removes to
plead her case.

TIFFANY-BRITTANY

Mr. Matherson! Tell me it's not too late to join the art museum trip. Here's my permission slip and my money.

DEX

Oooh! I'm sorry, Tiffany. I think I just sold the last two seats. Besides, after your outburst in class yesterday, maybe I'd rather not worry about the impression you will make in a formal environment.

TIFFANY-BRITTANY

I am so embarrassed about that! I was just in a real crabby mood, mad about getting negative points. It was immature. That's not the real me.

DEX

Your comment about my 'facist' class still wrankles. Asked to defend a teacher's harsh discipline, Samuel Johnson once said we could never know what severity of schoolboy beating might be justified, until we knew the limits of student obstinancy.

TIFFANY-BRITTANY

I can be useful to the whole group if you let me come. I've been to the art museum before. Give me a chance to earn back from yesterday. You always give students a chance to earn back!

DEX

Okay, since you put it like that, we have room for you.

TIFFANY-BRITTANY

(paying)

You won't be sorry, Dex.

DEX

Be sure I won't. In public I can't shield you from the normal social consequences for raw petulance.

Tiffany-Brittany exits.

FADE OUT

INT. SCHOOL BUS - DAY

FADE IN

Dex is alphabetizing permission slips at the front of the bus when Cathy slips on board just ahead of Daunte.

DEX

Cathy! So glad you made it! We're just about to leave.

CATHY

I told you you could count on me.

DEX

The students will be amazed to see you in person, I've talked about you so often. It's like 'Show and Tell.'

CATHY

Don't be an ass! May I sit anywhere?

DEX

Make yourself comfortable. Wade right in. (To all) I'm passing out the study guide for the tour. You have specific assignments you must fulfill. You will rely on this preparation to write a truly bangin' essay in class tomorrow. Stay focused and have fun!

ZORAIDA

Tomorrow? An essay in class tomorrow? It's the last day before winter vacation, Dex.

DEX

I oppose this business of not working the day before not working, since the natural extension of this principle is that every day is a day off.

CATHY

Dex, why aren't you showing your 'Jeopardy!' appearance, tomorrow? Students, Dex always shows the tape from when he was on

(MORE)

CATHY (cont'd)
'Jeopardy!' the day before winter
break.

ASIA
Dex! You be on 'Jeopardy!'?

DANIEL
Dex was on 'Jeopardy!', y'all! Did
you win?

DEX
(To Cathy) Thanks for this. (To
all) I was 3300 points ahead of
the four-time winner going into
'Final Jeopardy!' The final
category was 'Literature.'

ASIA
He lost. Ooops!

DEX
I lost, but I was good television!

DAUNTE
I don' know 'bou' all dat. It jus'
be scheisty he ain' gonna show us
no moobie.

ZORAIDA
Sorry you lost, Dex.

TIFFANY-BRITTANY
It don't really matter he lost. He
was on television. That's the
important thing.

DEX
Coming back to the study guide. I
ask you to consider the issue of
validation in the 'Life of
Frederick Douglass.' He's proving
his own humanity. A sentient and
literate being is not a piece of
furniture to be sold or wrecked.

Cathy enjoys watching Dex working the crowd.

DEX
The pre-writing question you must
answer is this: How do the artists
you will see today authenticate
themselves as human beings? We'll
see American artists Henry Ossawa
(MORE)

DEX (cont'd)

Tanner--wake up, Farthwar--Horace Pippin, Thomas Eakins. Your hair is beautiful; leave it alone. Martin Puryear, our greatest living sculptor, the quilt-maker Marie Hensley. Put your phone away, Bododeo. The collage-artist Romare Bearden, and Thornton Dial, chief among the so-called 'outsiders.' Brittany, stop!

How do these artists authenticate themselves? How do we know each experienced first-hand what they are portraying? That's the 'were-they-really-there?' question.

Douglass answers this question with detail, a sense of place: a plantation on the Eastern Shore, the field of sourghum, a tiny boat in the Chesapeake.

Next, how do we know each of these artists is an authentic, honest-to-Dex artist? This is the 'why-should-we-care?' question. Don't cop out. 'He's an artist because I saw him at the art museum' is circular reasoning. What style or skill does the artist exhibit that makes the whole culture want to grasp him or her to its bosom? How, like Frederick Douglass, do they distinguish themselves, a privileged voice above the mute lumps of flesh?

Gerald stares out the bus window, watching a lone sculler on the Schuylkill. Dex sits by Cathy.

DEX

The over-arching goal of my teaching is to get the students to appreciate how a picture or story is saturated by the whole of the culture that produced it. Let's see if that light will dawn today.

CATHY

I already have a headache.

DISSOLVE

INT. GREAT STAIRCASE, PHILA. MUSEUM OF ART - DAY

Dex watches first one, then another of his two groups carrying canvas stools against the Chagall backdrop, climbing the stairs. Under the Calder mobile, a mom and her son are looking. The boy wears a complete set of cardboard armor. He is a mute, and Dex addresses him.

DEX

That's a mobile by a
Philadelphian, Alexander Calder.
Fantastic, isn't it?

Look out the window and a mile
down the Benjamin Franklin
Parkway. Do you see the fountain
spraying water? There! Do you see
that? That fountain was made by
this man's father, Alexander
Stirling Calder, and it's called
the Four Rivers Fountain.

But that's not all, folks! Do you
see the man in the hat standing on
top of City Hall? Do you see him,
two miles away? That is a statue
of William Penn and it was made by
Alexander Milne Calder, this man's
grandfather. What a gift we have,
right here in Philadelphia. From
this one spot, we can see the work
of three generations of master
artists, all lined up in a row.
You command the finest outlook in
the city, Sir Knight.

The enraptured child makes a sound from deep inside, not
speech, but communicative.

DEX

You're very welcome! Have a great
visit.

Dex exits.

FADE OUT

INT. STUDENT ANIMATION SEQUENCE - DAY

A student-made animation illustrating their art museum trip has a beat-box soundtrack, ripe for dance moves. The film uses paper cut-outs to animate works of art, and marionettes cavorting in front of a screen projection of those animations.

A swirl of paper stars congeals as a still of Calder's "Constellation" mobile. A title appears: "Our Trip to the Art Museum," crediting Damien, Asia, and Zoraida. Three students portrayed by 16- to 18-inch puppets walk past an animated version of Horace Pippin's "Victory." The Statue of Liberty with her torch shimmers. The hooded figure in the center drives a spike into the fulcrum of the monumental, wooden "V".

The three marionettes boogaloo past Henry Ossawa Tanner's "Annunciation." An animated Mary trembles in her bed as a light brightens and dims to her right. The Mary cut-out cavorts with the three passers-by.

Figures from a Romare Bearden collage peel away from their background and array themselves on a Marie Hensley quilt as if it were a checkerboard, moving like game pieces. Lastly, the puppet trio encounters the wire silhouette of Thornton Dial's "Tiger," which swallows them whole. They cavort in its belly.

FADE OUT

INT. THORNTON DIAL GALLERY - DAY

FADE IN

DOCENT

What associations does the tiger
have for you?

CATHY

'Tiger, tiger, burning bright,/In
the forests of the night/Something
something, meow, meow/Could frame
thy fateful symmetry?'

DEX

(breaks in)

Come on, troop. You can do better
than this. Analyze the sculpture.
You must have some reaction to it.

The students offer no reactions.

DEX

Tiffany. You're an avowed art fancier. What do you think Thornton Dial is trying to say with this piece?

TIFFANY-BRITTANY

To me it's a hunk of junk, like it was picked out of the trash. He's trying to make some stuff out of garbage and sell it to fools who see value in everything, even when it's just junk.

Students laugh and Bododeo nuzzles Tiffany-Brittany, wrapping her in his parka.

DEX

That's not a critical reaction. It's passive-aggressive rant. Most of the fine things in the world take effort to appreciate. Go to the art on its own terms if it doesn't come to you.

TIFFANY-BRITTANY

I have a right to my opinion. You can't make me like it when I don't.

DEX

I never asked, nor do I care what you like, young woman. You can have some pop-gun, dollar-store, wanabee thug maul you in public, if you like. But my business is to get you to develop some understanding of these art works. Your tantrums have become exhausting. Minus 400 points. You can earn some of those back by getting a clue.

BODODEO

Why don't you take your medicine, Dex? I mean, what's your problem?

DEX

What you are doing, Bododeo, is not showing concern for Brittany, who could use a good role model, right now. You lose 400 points. You can earn some of those points back by showing concern for

(MORE)

DEX (cont'd)
others. Students: pay close
attention to the last painter on
your tour, Horace Pippin, another
brilliant 'outsider,' and we'll
meet back at the bus in another
twenty minutes.

As the students stare and sulk, Dex exits the gallery,
winking at Cathy, who rolls her eyes.

FADE OUT

EXT. PARKED BUS - DAY

FADE IN

The wind is howling, forcing Cathy to stand near Dex.
Students file off the bus and hover nearby, then exit.

JAMES
(stepping off bus)
Dex? Do we have to go to class?

DEX
I've been explaining that for the
last five minutes, James. Inside
the school, they're having seventh
period. I'm not advocating anyone
should cut. However, your field
trip entitles you to miss a full
class day. If you enter the
building, you have to go to class.
Get it?

DANIEL
So, do we have to go to class, or
what?

DEX
Can anyone explain this to Daniel?
Ask Zofya. She is conscious.

CATHY
Dex.

JAMES
Why don't you just give us the
answer?

DEX
I do, but you don't hear it.

CATHY
(moving under his
coat)

Dex.

DEX
Zofya! James, too. What is it,
princess?

CATHY
Just let them go! You don't have
to keep trying--

DEX
You're right. I'm sorry. Thanks
for coming, today. You were great!
It was a train wreck, wasn't it?
I've never been kicked out of a
public place in my life!

CATHY
We weren't exactly kicked out and
it wasn't your fault.

DEX
The teacher is always at fault.
(Does Adam West) If I
can...just..reach..utility belt!
Must..save..Gotham!

CATHY
Knock it off, Dex. I'm worried
about you. I don't like the
feeling.

DEX
I'm fine. Full of piss and
vinegar.

CATHY
(yanking coat)
Full of shit! You're definitely
not fine. You look run down, sleep
deprived. And your teaching,
today: moving double-time, picking
off the least infraction of speech
like a sharpshooter. It's so
familiar.

DEX
Teaching interactions amp me up. I
know it. But I'm not manic.

CATHY

This is like our first year together.

DEX

When I was literally mad about you? Best year of my life.

CATHY

You were hallucinating! You had a conversation with God! I had to take you to the ER.

DEX

A little commune with the angels. These things happen. Didn't you see Tanner's "Annunciation"?

CATHY

I was so scared. It was SO not all right! You had this same confidence you were in control, remember? I tried to get you to admit yourself. The attending psychiatrist asked you, 'Do you know why you're here?'

DEX

I said, 'Excessive smugness.' Funny trumps insanity. You took me back home.

CATHY

I didn't want to take responsibility. I was..It was..

DEX

But you did take responsibility--eventually.

CATHY

In my way.

She hugs him.

CATHY

I have to go, now.

Cathy exits. Dex surveys the area. Tiffany-Brittany is standing at a school side entrance. She sharply strikes the metal panel and pulls the door open on the rebound. She enters. Dex approaches. He spots and picks up a ten of clubs

from the sidewalk, and he pockets it. Mimicking Tiffany-Brittany's move, he enters the school.

CUT TO

INT. STAIRWELL - DAY

Dex is climbing the stairs. He sings one line of the 'Ghostbusters' theme.

DEX

'Bustin' makes me feel go-oo-ood!'

CUT TO

INT. DEX'S CLASSROOM - DAY

Tiffany-Brittany is leaning out the window with the broken sash. The heavy frame is supported by a Webster's dictionary, pages flopping slightly in the breeze. She holds an iPod and headphones and wears a short, blue-and-white plaid skirt. Dex enters silently and approaches her. The book slips so only the front cover still supports the frame.

TIFFANY-BRITTANY

Up here, Bodie! (Waving iPod) I found it on Dex's desk. I'll be right down. What? I can't hear you.

A wave rustles the loose pages of the book. An "Inquisitor's Card" graphic falls from the Slinky-ing sheaf and flutters to the floor. The rest of the dictionary pops out of the window as Dex nears. The window crushes Tiffany-Brittany's upper thorax. She goes limp.

BODODEO

(from below)

Tiff! I'm coming, baby!

Tiffany-Brittany's too short skirt is hiked up on her buttocks. Dex tugs the skirt to provide more coverage. He steps back to assess the clothing adjustment, then exits.

CUT TO

INT. HALLWAY OUTSIDE OF DEX'S CLASSROOM - DAY

Dex walks away from the stairwell outside his classroom door, but not hastily. He turns the corner at the end of the

hall just as Bododeo's footsteps and frantic voice achieve the third floor.

BODODEO

Tiffany!

FADE OUT

INT. ROCKLAND HIGH MAIN OFFICE - DAY

FADE IN

The main office is filled with poinsettia plants in cardboard trays, crowding every surface. Teachers are locating their box by a room number stapled to the tray. Much careful balancing ensues, teachers signing-in and so forth. Dex is looking for his box when Ruthie approaches.

RUTHIE

Dex! I'm so sorry. It's just awful!

DEX

Don't tell me. Mice ate the food in the Kwanzaa display, again.

RUTHIE

Oh, God! You haven't heard. There's been a terrible accident. Tiffany-Brittany snuck back into school after the field trip. She was leaning out of the window and the prop fell out of the frame. Her thorax was crushed. She's dead!

DEX

Another one?! This is absurd!

RUTHIE

I know. Parents will be through the roof on the school safety issue. Fortunately, there's the long holiday. Things might blow over. No classes today, or memorial service, but the counselors will have a response for grieving students and staff when we return. Poor, Bododeo! He saw it happen, found her body.

DEX

I would swear I saw those two leaving campus together, after the bus ride. My dictionary! Oh, God.

RUTHIE

Teachers are picking up their poinsettias for the sale, and then pretty much clearing out of the building.

DEX

Why do we allow ourselves to become mere hucksters of an insincere exertion of seasonal cheer when it is all we can do to cultivate our own classes?

DR. NUXTALL

C'mon, Matherson. It's the last day before a holiday recess. The students wouldn't be learning a damn thing anyway. In the midst of great tragedy, what's wrong with spreading a spot of holiday cheer? Besides, it benefits the Honor Society, of which I am the sponsor.

DEX

You dishonor me, sending me door-to-door with these freakish...plants!

Dex nearly loses his load, squashing the carton up against Ruthie, who steadies him.

RUTHIE

Oh, Dex! I know you feel horrible, but don't take it out on these poor poinsettias. Life goes on! And the school can use the money--

CUT TO

EXT. DRUG STORE PARKING LOT, RIDGE AVENUE - DAY

Dex drives his grimy Civic into a parking spot. He gets out, and reaches in for the tray of plants. On the way into the drug store, he leaves the tray on top of a trash receptacle with a sign that says, 'Free! Take One!'

CUT TO

INT. DRUG STORE - DAY

Dex is reading the rows of little boxes of cold remedies when Dr. Nuxtall approaches. Dex tries to avoid being recognized.

DR. NUXTALL

Mr. Matherson. The people's English teacher. I was thinking about you. I apologize for seeming callous earlier. These tragedies: they must hit you harder than anyone, your own students, and so forth.

DEX

Another hideous death, TV crews, kids making on-camera shout outs 'to their peeps in Oak Lane,' more platitudes. Life goes on, she said.

DR. NUXTALL

Let us not allow these events to mar the serenity of a long respite from teaching. How do you plan to use your vacation time, sir?

DEX

You'll judge this harshly, I know. I plan to grade a stack of book journals and bring my records up-to-date.

DR. NUXTALL

I implore you not to waste precious recovery time calculating pointless grades. What did you give them in the first marking period? That will suffice in the second. Why evaluate when we can sort?

DEX

That works when you have honor roll students, creamed classes like Ruthie has. Those kids can find the gradable elements of a lesson written in lemon juice and hidden in the bottom of a desk drawer. They don't need us. But

(MORE)

DEX (cont'd)
 what about the rest? It's teachers
 who are first to make teaching
 irrelevant. That bugs me.

DR. NUXTALL
 Oh, please. I thought you were a
 man of some experience, not this
 callow prat I see before me.

DEX
 Worse than that: a snotty prat,
 with a head cold. What does this
 label say? Do you mind?

DR. NUXTALL
 (reading box)
 It contains 10 milligrams of
 dextromethorphan, a cough
 suppressant.

DEX
 (coughing weakly)
 That'll do. Thanks for the
 consultation, Doctor. Happy New
 Year!

DR. NUXTALL
 Same to you, young Matherson!

CUT TO

EXT. DRUG STORE PARKING LOT, RIDGE AVENUE - DAY

Dex comes out of the store with a small plastic bag. The box
 on the trash receptacle is empty. He tamps it into the
 container. Looking down the Ridge, he sees two youth selling
 his plants at a traffic light. He smiles and gets into the
 grimy Civic, starting the engine.

FADE OUT

INT. DEX'S CLASSROOM - DAY

FADE IN

A rainy day in January finds Dex's class arranged for group
 work. Zofya, wearing her veil-less burqa, manages class
 discipline as Dex teaches.

DEX

The graphic on the board shows main and subordinate ideas for your essay on Ellison's 'Invisible Man.' You'll be brainstorming the topic with your group, but let's first take a crack at it together. Try to fill in this block: 'The chapter that takes place in the blank is central to Ellison's concern about blank.'

ASIA

Oooh! I know. 'Book.' The chapter that takes place in the 'book.'

DEX

(doing Groucho
take)

Ayeee! Can we get any less specific? We need ideas that are particular to this book, troop.

WAKEEM

G'ahead, if you wan' my boy to ef you up!

DAUNTE

Bring it, dawg!

Zofya speeds to the noisy table.

ZOFYA

Wakeem, Daunte, what you are doing now is not showing concern for classmates. We need productive class time so's everyone will do well on the essay. For not showing concern, you both lose 200 points.

DAUNTE

Okay.

WAKEEM

Who you thin' you be, De's?

ZOFYA

What you are doing now, Wakeem, is not accepting a consequence. That makes it more likely you will interrupt the class again. For not accepting a consequence, you lose 200 points. You can earn some

(MORE)

ZOFYA (cont'd)
of those points back by saying
'Okay.'

WAKEEM
Okay. Zofya.

DEX
(as Bob Hope)
Ain't she something. Grrrrr!

Zofya quietly processes the teaching points for the lads as
Dex resumes.

DEX
Again, 'The chapter that takes
place in the blank is central to
the author's concern about blank.'

DANIEL
The chapter that takes place in
the college is central to the
author's concern for the--

Zoraida whispers to Daniel.

DANIEL
--institution of all-Black
schools.

DEX
Well! Daniel! Another country
heard from. Can someone come up
with another setting and Ellison's
corresponding theme?

Zofya unobtrusively crosses to Daniel to reward his
participation with Dex-tra Credits.

DAUNTE
(reading)
'The chap'per dat ta's place in
the pain' fact'ry shows Ellism's
concern for da theme on man versus
machine.' Like in Dr. Dre, dawg!

Daunte, James, and Kasbar tap fists.

DEX
Ga-ba-gool! Well played, Daunte.
'A hit! A palpable hit!' Now all
we need to do is complete the rest
of this hierarchy of ideas with
relevant, detailed examples from
(MORE)

DEX (cont'd)
 the text. Zofya! I want every
 group to fill in their whole page.

ZOFYA
 Got it, Dex!

Dex tours the class as Zofya polices. The satisfying noise of fruitful work rises to the ceiling, where a mural showing figures representing the five components of a well-made essay is done in bright chalk. Dex speaks to Asia, Damien, and Daniel's group.

DEX
 You folks finished, or wasting
 time?

DAMIEN
 We did the whole organizer, Dex.

DEX
 Mind if I take a look? This is
 very good. Nicely done. I see you
 included Lucius Brockway. What
 benefit to the main idea of the
 novel is this character?

DANIEL
 He's that old, black guy in the
 boiler room at Liberty Paints.
 (flips paper to read) 'He's the
 only man who knows how to run the
 power station or mix Liberty's
 best-selling product, its Optic
 White Paint.' He's been in the
 factory since it opened.

DEX
 That's a summary of what he does.
 But how do his actions fit in with
 the over-arching theme of
 'Invisible Man'?

ASIA
 Because no one can see him. He's
 deep down in the building. He's
 one of the invisibles.

DEX
 A-sia! I love it when you get all
 smart and junk. What about it,
 Daniel? Make sense of Lucius
 Brockway in terms of the whole
 novel. (As Foghorn) Ah craves, ah
 (MORE)

DEX (cont'd)
say, ah craves bedazzlement!

DANIEL
He's like the black man in this country, whose skills helped to roll out our culture, but his contributions are overlooked. The whole country would crumble except for Blacks' contribution.

DAMIEN
Lucius, that crazy old guy, puts down the narrator as another of the useless college men they keep sending him, college men with no real skills.

DEX
You'll find it in Randy Newman:
(sings) 'College men, from LSU,
went in dumb, came out dumb, too.'

DAMIEN
Brockway's own effi--, efficacy makes him arrogant, like his identification with the job and the factory power plant means more to him than his Blackness. He's more like the spirit of the plant than an employee.

DEX
That's fine, group! (Dex slaps his mouth with cork-popping effect.)
Zofya! Reward these scholars with mad Freddies and Halles.

The telephone rings, making Dex groan and grumble.

DEX
...interrupt the best student exchange...never seen the inside of a classroom...ought to let it ring...Dex, here! Yes, hello, Mrs. Greenblatt. No, not interrupting anything. I was expecting your call (aside) since we were finally getting down to business! Yes. Those curriculum guides, I remember. Materials from that test preparation conglomerate...No, I never took them out of the box. Come to think of it, I never even

(MORE)

DEX (cont'd)
saw the box...Right, a memo. I
remember it...After next period,
the conference room, you and Mrs.
Oneroff. I'll be there.

Dex slumps dejectedly at his desk. He pours warm soda into
his mug and slyly spikes it with something from his bottom
desk drawer. Damien and Daniel approach.

DEX
Gentlemen. What's up?

DAMIEN
You know how you say we can
interpret a painting the same as a
work of literature? There's this
weird graphic floating around...

DANIEL
Everybody's copying it!

DAMIEN
And we thought you might interpret
it for us.

DEX
I can deny you nothing as
consequence of your superb
performance in class, today. Let
me see that rascule...Yes, the
baffling calling card that's been
connected to these deadly school
accidents.

DAMIEN
Tell us what it means.

DEX
Damned if I know.

STUDENTS
Groan.

DEX
I can identify some of the objects
in it, but I don't know if I can
spin them into a coherent whole.

DANIEL
Who's the dog in the red hood?

DEX

Hmm. That 'D' does form a hood on the smiling face hanging there. The figure may be some kind of Inquisitor, Spanish judges of the Inquisition who sentenced non-Christians to torture and death.

DANIEL

That's cool.

DAMIEN

See, we thought the 'D' and the red hood stand for the Devil.

DEX

Maybe, but the iconography is inconsistent. This devil is hornless. The red thing is definitely a hood as we can tell by the straps hanging down.

DANIEL

What about the gold crown he's wearing?

DEX

You mean that 'W'?

DANIEL

Oh, snap! It IS a 'W'!

DEX

The gold cipher may mean two things simultaneously. It's a crown like one of those bonnets the Pope wears, a ceremonial crown representing his absolute authority over the one, true church and blah, blah, blah. Or, the 'W' and the 'D' could be the initials of someone close to these horrific accidents.

DANIEL

Walter Donaghue! Yo, old copy-the-notes-on-the-board Donaghue is the Rockland Eraser, y'all!

DEX

Kasbar, think fast. A copy-mad teacher is a serial killer called "the Eraser." What's that called?

KASBAR

Irony, Dex.

DEX

Splendid! Oh, Zofya!

ZORAIDA

Dr. Wimple! Dr. Wimple! She's the one!

DEX

Our principal? Has anyone seen her lately? These deaths occurred way up here on the third floor, and we've never seen the principal higher than the second. I'd bet my frequent flier miles she was out of town on either one of the crucial dates. At a conference, or the ice show, or something. The lady's somewhere, but in the immortal words of Harry Kalas--'She's outta here!'

DAMIEN

The killer could be you, Dex. The crown sideways, the busted 'one' and the looking-glass '8' make three-eighteen, your room number.

A buzzer signals the end of class. Students hurry in and out.

DANIEL

I bet it is you, Mr. Matherson. Some people say you're too sweet to be the guy, but I keep 'mindin' them yer crazy, too. Don't need to be diesel when you've got crazy to back it up. Am I right? See you!

Dex recites to no one in particular.

DEX

I heard a sound like a penitent's electrocution, the heavy door sucking in the frame, then swinging wide, students yammering at a fever pitch about tomorrow

(MORE)

DEX (cont'd)
 and tomorrow, where life and death
 are mere pass-times, a light
 distraction from a frozen clock,
 and I watched a new batch burst
 into my room from some other
 nowhere, having pressed their
 dirty noses to the glass of that
 shapeless elsewhere all students
 crave, to wait there impatiently
 for time to run out, all over
 again.

BLACKOUT

INT. CONFERENCE ROOM - DAY

FADE IN

RUTHIE
 ..in Somerset County, the
 Johnstown area. Jack and I are
 from there. My dad taught me how
 to shoot a rifle, and I was with
 Jack when I killed my first buck
 with a bow.

ONEROFF
 Which do you prefer, the roof or
 the trunk tie-down?

RUTHIE
 Oh! That reminds me of a really
 bizarre thing that happened to us
 coming back on the turnpike, last
 season...

Dex enters.

DEX
 Morning, colleagues. Sorry to
 interrupt.

RUTHIE
 Don't worry about it, dear. I was
 just telling Mrs. Oneroff my plans
 for the long weekend.

DEX
 I heard. Have a swell..buck hunt.
 I see it now, Bullwinkle splayed
 on the grille of your SUV like a
 bug, muttering, 'Nuthin' up my

(MORE)

DEX (cont'd)

sleeve!'

RUTHIE

Dex! Why aren't you using the new textbooks the district adopted, the ones made by the test preparation company?

DEX

(as Rocky)

'This trick never works.'

ONEROFF

Excuse me? I sent every teacher a memo, directing you to use these new books immediately. Ruthie says you've ignored it, and I want to know why.

DEX

Well, thanks for asking. I don't think you realize my deep animosity for these texts. I hate that the same company that designs our city-wide, benchmark tests sells us the textbooks to study for them. It's like those pop-up ads for computer virus protection where the service infects your computer, and then charges for the software to remove it.

RUTHIE

Here we go! Dex is going to tell us everything he hates about the standard--By law!--district textbooks. Ten million dollars they spent for brand-spanking new books, and you're using paperbacks that are 25 or 30 years old. We never had enough books, and now we do. Savor the moment; don't fight it. Remember when you begged me to get you those dictionaries? I'd think you'd be thrilled to have mint-new anthologies, and they're practically a gift!

DEX

But Ruthie, they're not even real anthologies. They're more like 'Reader's Digest' excerpts from real books. I can't teach my

(MORE)

DEX (cont'd)

students how to appreciate a novel if I never assign them a reading more than five paragraphs long. These pernicious books of yours teach comprehension skills divorced from a worthwhile context. Half of the time, the passages aren't even by authors in the canon. Instead of Ralph Ellison, we'd be reading about different types of acoustic tile, or the story of the little squirrel who learned a valuable lesson about electricity. These books don't even try to hide the fact that they're in the same format as the SAT or PSSA, short passages with corresponding and annoying multiple choice questions. When they finally get around to printing actual literary texts, they're whittled down to meaningless slogans. They even condensed Emily Dickinson. 'I could not stop for death, or even stanza two.' It's disgusting, or would be for anyone with a regard for literature. I won't teach 'Pride' without 'Prejudice,' 'Sound' without 'Fury,' or 'Moby' without 'Dick.'

ONEROFF

We all know your dedication and idealism, Mr. Matherson, but don't question my commitment to literature. I taught English for twenty years before becoming a vice principal.

DEX

Hey! Brother rat! This being true, why won't you let me teach real books? Teaching to standardized tests is bad practice that's only forced on the poorest schools. They'd never stand for it in the suburbs, dummifying down the curriculum. These meaningless skill-and-drill routines inspire no one.

RUTHIE

I've always thought that if a skill is important enough to be on the test, it's important enough to study in class.

DEX

Ruthie. Test-taking skills are different than academic ones. Filling in ovals? Discounting 'trick' distractors in a list of answer choices? The construct has no use outside of the exam. If they didn't have these tests, we wouldn't need to study for them.

ONEROFF

You've lost me there, Mr. Matherson. Of course if there were no tests, we wouldn't have to study for them.

Dex falls silent.

ONEROFF

The bottom line is...

RUTHIE

At the end of the day, Dex...

ONEROFF

You are going to have get with the program, like the rest of us. Welcome to the era of teacher accountability. I expect to hear from your department chair that you are using the required text by the end of next week.

CUT TO

INT. BOOKROOM HALLWAY - DAY

Ruthie fumbles through a ring of keys outside the bookroom door.

RUTHIE

I mean this as a compliment, Mr. Matherson: wouldn't you be happier teaching out in the suburbs? With your skills, why waste your time at Rockland High?

DEX

That's a bit disingenuous, don't you think? You know they're disinclined to hire former Philadelphia teachers in the 'burbs, the implication being we're all tainted with corruption. It may surprise you to learn that when I graduated top-of-my-class from Temple, teaching at Rockland High was exactly the kind of job I wanted. I know some behavioral leveraging techniques that better serve the population here, token economies and teaching interactions that aren't so useful in Lower Merion or Perkiomen.

Dex spots a playing card on the floor, a Jack of Spades, and pockets it.

DEX

I'm like an archangel with sickening powers to discriminate between good and e-vil. Why, other than dusting the Brancusi, teaching in the district is my Philadelphia dream job.

Ruthie finds the right key and leads the way into the dusty bookroom.

RUTHIE

And I'm the book fairy.

CUT TO

INT. BOOKROOM - DAY

Dex and Ruthie survey the book storage room. It's as dusty as a tomb. Unpacked cartons are in heaps next to towering cast iron shelves loaded with unused texts. The shelves are ornate, like the Beaux Arts period for which they were built.

RUTHIE

My style is less personal than yours. I don't have that elaborate point system, or the Dex-tra Credits. And I'm not so charismatic as you. I'm not going for some show-stopping moment to grab their attention. The work

(MORE)

RUTHIE (cont'd)
controls them. Worksheets, a busy
textbook--they provide structure.

DEX
Stifling, pre-packaged,
fill-in-the-blank worksheets.
You'll find it in Bloom's
Taxonomy: the repetition of facts
is at the very bottom of cognitive
development.

RUTHIE
We better find your new textbooks.
The shipping guy said they're
spread out through the whole room.
When you didn't claim your order
as you were supposed to, they
stuffed 'em in here wherever they
could make space. I'll start
looking through these cartons, and
you take the shelves on the other
side.

Dex looks through the ancient treasure on the shelves,
ignoring the cartons on the floor.

DEX
You know, I'm always amazed at the
book titles teachers were using 30
years ago. Material we consider
college level now, they taught in
the ninth grade. 'The Iliad,'
'Canterbury Tales,' Shakespeare--
even his plays for which there is
no Hollywood version with a
heart-throbby cast.

RUTHIE
Ah-hah! Pay dirt! I've found a
carton of 'Journeys Through
Pathways.' No, wait, I think
that's the tenth grade text. Your
eleventh grade gets 'Pathways
Through Journeys.'

Dex stretches to full height, trying to read the spines on
the upper shelves.

DEX
Oh, my! Is that what I think it
is?

Dex jumps up and down to see a particular cache of books. Then, he scales the set of shelves using the next rack for half his support. Getting to the top, he pulls out a dark volume, blows on it, brushes it, and raises a plume of dust.

DEX

It's 'Hamlet'! I can't believe it. Our ancestors actually taught 'Hamlet' in this building! When was this volume last used? Let me see. Ruthie? Are you there? This copy of 'Hamlet' was last used in 1963! I'm going to check the books at the back of the pile.

RUTHIE

Dex? What are you doing over there? We still haven't found your language arts workbook, 'Page-Long Adventures in Vocabulary.' Oh, look, this 'Journeys' has a cute story about a conure with clipped wings who walks 12 miles to reunite with the little boy who raised him.

DEX

(mocking)

Oh, gee, Mrs. Greenblatt. There's a senior, word-find workbook over here that uses the words 'necrosis' and 'narcolepsy'!

Dex reaches deep into the shelf while pushing with his back foot against the shelf unit behind him. He goes deeper into the stack until his foot knocks over the immensely heavy, adjacent shelf. By a loud domino effect, seven shelf units come crashing over, and Ruthie is crushed. Dex yelps, jumps down, and runs across to his department head. Her feet are the only part of her still visible. He tries to lift the weight off her body, but he can't budge it. Dex feels for a pulse at the victim's ankles. He finds none. After making sure the set of keys are in Ruthie's purse, he turns off the light, and slips undetected into the hall, pulling the locked door behind him.

FADE OUT

INT. STUDENT CHECKPOINT - DAY

FADE IN

On a spring day, Dex enters the building through the service entrance, where students pass through the metal detectors. Dex is carrying a chainsaw and attracting student notice.

HALLWAY MONITOR

Good morning, Mr. Dex. What you got there?

DEX

This old thing? It's a Husqvarna chainsaw.

HALLWAY MONITOR

I meant to aks, what are you doing with it? Light pruning, cutting out the deadwood, mebbe?

DEX

Why, Clarence. Nine years and you finally show an interest in my lesson plans.

HALLWAY MONITOR

Just curious, Have a blessed day, Mr. Dex!

Students try to follow Dex around the security checkpoint.

HALLWAY MONITOR

Yo! Where do you think you're going. You knows everybody has to pass through the x-ray! What, are you new?

CUT TO

INT. ROCKLAND HIGH MAIN OFFICE - DAY

Dex enters. As he is late, only a few teachers are signing in or getting mail. The chainsaw dangles from his left hand below the counter as he signs in. We see a signature next to Ruthie Greenblatt's name and the "3/30" date. Dex whistles softly. Ruthie's name is signed-in for weeks. A head shot of Gerald in short dreadlocks establishes his gaping-mouth reaction to Dex's hardware. Dex briskly exits.

FADE OUT

INT. DEX'S CLASSROOM - DAY

FADE IN

A loud buzzer sounds. Dex is in the doorway and students are visible in the hall.

DEX
Come inside, students.

DAUNTE
But, Mr. De's. Dat was just da
firs' buzzer. We hab fo' minu's.

DEX
Daunte, what you are doing now--

BODODEO
--is not following instructions!
G'won, Daunte. Don't argue with
the teacher.

Bododeo gives Daunte a gentle push, and Daunte enters.

DEX
Bodie! I'm flabbergasted! What you
did was show concern for other
students. You just earned a
freshly minted Douglass.

BODODEO
In that case, I'll trade you.
Still collec' playing cards? I
foun' dis un outsi'.

DEX
Five of spades. Influence or
mastery over an adversary. What a
thoughtful gesture. (speaking low)
I'm a bit surprised by your new
attitude. Not just now, but
lately. You come promptly to
class, stay on task, follow
instructions, and now you're
becoming a positive influence on
your peers.

BODODEO
C'mon, Mr. Matherson. You know why
I do whatever you say.

DEX
Why?

BODODEO
You da Rockland Eraser.

Bododeo sits. The room is arranged in a grid, the windows propped open with lengths of wood, and a cartoon is drawn on the blackboard in the "Notes of the Day" space, which students are copying. A suicidal ant says, "Group work! I'd rather kill myself!" Dex makes notations in his laptop, then takes a pair of work gloves out of his backpack.

DEX

I appreciate everyone's attentiveness. Who has a reaction to the cartoon on the board? Zofya?

ZOFYA

The ant who threw hisself into the pit hates to participate with the whole group. He thinks he's rebelling, but his actions let the whole group cross the chasm.

DEX

Splendid! Asia?

ASIA

The suicidal ant looks at things his selfish way, but the big picture means something completely different. That's irony, Dex.

DEX

Well played! Before I forget, I finally finished your 'Invisible Man' essays. For the most part you showed remarkable progress over previous efforts. James--hand these out for us. Chance to meet new people.

I spent the last three days cutting wood on a lot I own in West Virginia. Usually, my trips there are restful and idyllic, but this trip I couldn't stop thinking about the dynamic between the individual and the rest of society.

Dex falters, searching for the right words.

DEX

My thoughts are racing, and I admit I'm a bit uncertain how to bring you all up to speed. Anyway, I started thinking about this

(MORE)

DEX (cont'd)

theme after a peculiar occurrence.

I was on my knees in a pile of wood chips that's been growing on my construction site for years, there in the forest primeval. I was as alone as a person can get, miles from the nearest neighbor. At night, the feeling of isolation is intense. A wood lot in West Virginia gets dark at night in a way we can't imagine here in the city. Even in the daytime, you get so alone you can believe you are listening to your own thoughts coming from outside your head.

There I am in the wood chips, filing a saw blade. Suddenly, I had an encounter so strange, I'm having trouble telling you about it--frightening and inspirational, direct and mysterious. Wait! I know! Oldest rule of drama, right? Why tell when you can show?

Dex slips on the leather gloves and reaches for the chainsaw behind his desk. In a sweeping motion, he clears the desk with the blade and plops the machine into its center. Students gasp or laugh nervously. Wakeem moves from the back of the class forward. Dex pulls on the starter cable a few times. The device makes catching noises, but doesn't start. A plume of blue smoke rises. Just as quickly as he started messing with the saw, Dex returns to his tale.

DEX

I was filing the saw blade in a heap of wood chips when it appeared, a fifteen-inches-long, coal black salamander. It rose up from the damp shavings and stretched out atop the heap, appearing to study me with the red eye on the side of its dew-shiny head. I have many phobias, but none so debilitating as my fear of wild creatures of any kind. I don't mind that 'possums, and raccoons, and rats are out there, but face-to-face contact with one makes me squeamish. 'Freaks me out' is the vernacular. My abrupt visitor with his inscrutable eye

(MORE)

DEX (cont'd)
 freaked me out. I jerked backward,
 falling off my feet, yet its
 supernatural presence transfixed
 me.

DAMIEN
 Maybe it was a rubber salamander
 and someone was punking you.

DEX
 I'll not be fooled by rubber
 salamanders!

Dex works himself up into an evangelical froth, bouncing on
 the balls of his feet, speaking in rhythm.

DEX
 It seems irrational, but in my
 isolation, possessed as I was by
 my own internal test-patterns and
 mantras, I couldn't help thinking
 that the salamander, long as my
 forearm, was trying to tell me
 something, something wordless and
 ancient. Then, with the same
 effect, a second, long, ebony
 salamander rose out of the sawdust
 and came to rest by the first one.
 They were identical. Except that
 they were side-by-side, I never
 would have believed they were two
 individual creatures.

Is there a God, or is that just
 one of the constructs that keeps
 man separate from the kingdom of
 Nature? These two emissaries
 reminded me--I say reminded
 because I vaguely know I've had
 other such moments of clarity--
 that all life on Earth is
 connected and the connection is
 billions of years old. They broke
 through the haze and fog, the
 accumulation of litter, the vanity
 of my Man-thoughts. They dispelled
 all that, reminding me that like
 the ants in the cartoon, all
 living things share immutable
 bonds, chemical perhaps, borne by
 invisible pheromones, messages
 beyond language, light in spectral
 bands beyond our seeing, sounds

(MORE)

DEX (cont'd)
above and below frequencies of
human hearing. The individual, the
loner, no matter how intent on
rebellion he be, takes part in
this wordless dialogue to further
the evolutionary ambitions of the
whole.

WAKEEM
The saw, Dex! What about the saw!

DEX
You're right, Wakeem. Why should I
try to express in mere words what
the chain saw reveals in a
gleaming instant?

Dex braces the saw and jerks the starter cable. The engine
appears to be catching, blue smoke spewing, but it doesn't
come to life.

DEX
We've been through the tedious
process of coming together as a
class. Some of us didn't make it.
But the way is clear for the rest
of us to proceed to the true core
of our work together, not as
individuals blindly dashing down
random alleyways, but with
cohesion, nourished by efforts
that only seem individual or
accidental, but are truly the will
of us all.

WAKEEM
(returning to seat)
Forge' it. He ain' never gonna
star' tha' mother.

DEX
I have a favorite song, students.
Let me teach it to you, and then
you may teach me yours, and all
the pathways you traveled to learn
it.

Dex pushes the choke in on the chainsaw. He gives one jerk
on the starter, and the Husqvarna belches to life.

DEX
(singing)
'You want to love her, but you're
too contrary, like a chainsaw
ripping through a dictionary, so
keep your mind off the sweet
behind of ou-ou-ou-our little
a-angel!'

Dex rips the blade through a dictionary atop a heap of flotsam on the desk. A spray of confetti fills the air. Students retreat in shock and awe. The blade pulls up, spinning the last of the volume into the room. Dex holds the roaring engine above his head, gunning it, and shouts.

DEX
Any questions?

BLACKOUT

INT. DEX'S CLASSROOM - DAY

FADE IN

Dex is fiddling with the debris on his desk, when Daniel disturbs him, plopping his Ellison essay onto the blotter.

DANIEL
You gave me back my essay on 'The
Invisible Man' without grading it.

DEX
The book is called 'Invisible
Man.' Get it right. Ellison, not
Wells.

DANIEL
Okay, okay. Maybe I said the title
wrong, but--

DEX
I don't have to grade that essay,
Daniel. It doesn't belong to any
of my students-- it's plagiarized!
And a more boldfaced fraud I
couldn't imagine. They don't pay
me enough to read the essays I
have to read. I'm not going to do
extra-curricular reading of this
spurious concoction for free.

DANIEL

Ah-hah! You didn't even look at the whole thing!

DEX

I read no further than the first sentence, your introduction: ' "Invisible Man" is a consummate novel of inextricable paradoxes, whose narrator is flooded with white light and yet claims to be hidden from the naked eye.' I found this word-for-word on deweycheatum dot com in under two minutes.

DANIEL

Okay. That was plagiarized. But the rest-- some of the rest-- is my own words. If you don't give me a grade on this essay, I'll fail this marking period, right?

DEX

You needed to turn in your own essay by the fifteenth. You didn't and you get a zero. Your other graded work can't make up for losing sixty points.

DANIEL

That's not fair! I deserve something for what I turned in, not zero percent! (Exiting) Hey, everybody! The chainsaw-wielding Rockland Eraser just erased my grade!

Dex folds Daniel's essay into his jacket pocket. Gerald rushes in, wearing an African folk costume.

GERALD

I'm outraged about you bringing that weapon into school, Mr. Matherson. Are you so arrogant you don't care if you scare your students half to death?

DEX

Gerald? You've changed!

GERALD

I'm liberated, Mr. Dex. Free from the White Imperialist cadre that runs this plantation backwater of a school! I'm leading my students to en-Black-enment and freedom!

DEX

How's it goin', eh?

GERALD

Not so great. You know, Ruthie's classes have a full 34-student roster, but maybe a dozen show up every day. I'm not discouraged, though. Don't change the subject. You brought a symbol of White violence against Blacks to your class to racially intimidate your pupils.

DEX

I don't know what you think a chainsaw is for, but I use it to chop wood.

GERALD

I've seen those movies, you know, where the city kids get stranded in some hick town in Texas, and a guy in a human skin mask chases after 'em with a chainsaw-- and he's always a white dude!

DEX

Gerald, have you been signing Ruthie in every day?

GERALD

I have, but I know she's still out there-- testing me. Wait 'til she sees what I've done! We're deconstructing 'To Kill A Mockingbird.' That paternalistic Atticus Finch-- like the black man needs a White to save him. I'm conducting the whole lesson in Ebonics. Ruthie'll be so proud of me. Can't let 'em think she's absent. It would spoil everything.

Gerald moves to the doorway.

GERALD

I'm going to report to Oneroff
what you're doing up here, Mr.
Dex! Maybe she'll suspend you! Her
last act before my Student
Empowerment Committee overthrows
the whole, racist administration!

Gerald exits. Dexter shuts the classroom door. He grabs a broom and uncertainly sweeps a bit, before returning it to the corner. Rummaging through his locker, he comes up with a quart-sized plastic container caked with moldy tomato sauce. He carries the container and the chainsaw out of the room.

CUT TO

EXT. STAFF PARKING LOT - DAY

Behind the high school, Dex crosses the staff parking lot with the saw and container. A loud banging and rattle diverts Dex's attention. He sees a custodian trying to open the side hatch of a green dumpster. The worker smacks the hatch with his hand, and it pops open. The top of the dumpster is chained shut. The custodian stuffs in a large, leaking trash bag.

Dex opens the trunk of his Honda and stoops on the ground, next to the saw. Opening the gas tank, he pours the contents into the container and puts the chainsaw in the trunk, closing it. He carries the plastic container to the dumpster and apes the custodian's move on the side hatch to open it. He tosses the container of gas hard inside the dumpster, and leaves the lot. The dumpster side panel, outfitted with a spring, closes and latches by itself.

CUT TO

INT. DEX'S CLASSROOM - DAY

Daniel enters as Dex sweeps confetti from his floor.

DEX

Oh, jeez. It's young Spaniel here
to yap and whine some more, or
maybe just mark his territory.

Dex indicates a copy of the "Inquisitor's Card" with a pencil through the eye, mounted on the bulletin board.

DEX

Doubtless that's your handiwork.
It's a clear-cut threat against a
teacher and could get you
expelled.

Dex sits wearily.

DANIEL

You won't be able to do anything
to me when I show you're the one
who's killing students. That paper
proves you're the Eraser!

DEX

I ought to blame myself for not
teaching you good research skills
or how to mount a proper proof.
What do you think you know,
Daniel?

DANIEL

Exhibit one: the reversible
sketch!

DEX

Puh-lease! I'm indulging you, but
don't make me listen to your 'Law
and Order' claptrap.

DANIEL

Sorry. This drawing is meant to be
flipped. It has two views, upright
and reversed, like a playing card.
This I know because when you flip
it, the smiling Inquisitor becomes
a frowning guy in a noose on the
gallows. See? Plus, the red 'X'
and the looking glass mean the
card has two sides.

DEX

This is much like reading one of
your essays. You have a lot of
points to make, but no conclusion.
And none of this interpretation is
really new. Again you're borrowing
someone else's ideas.

DANIEL

No! This is my big piece of
evidence: the letters 'WD' in the
upright position become 'DM' in
the reverse. That's you: Declan

(MORE)

DANIEL (cont'd)

Matherson!

DEX

What do you think this wild speculation is worth?

DANIEL

All's I want is for you to restore my sixty points.

DEX

Blackmail, threats-- oh, the appalling lengths these self-entitled yoots will go to just to avoid accepting a consequence. Okay, Spaniel. Here's the deal. I'm going to tell you exactly what you have to do to get credit for that paper. First, admit you were wrong to plagiarize, and you knew it was wrong when you submitted it.

DANIEL

I knew it. I never thought you'd catch me, or if you did, that you would care so much about it.

DEX

Good job accepting. Now apologize for threatening me. I don't deserve it.

DANIEL

I am sorry, Dex. I am so sorry.

DEX

All right, then. Here's the rest of what you need to do. You are going to take the original paper and cross out every line or idea that's lifted from other sources. Then, you will write a thoughtful paraphrase for each one with footnotes. I want the corrected work on my desk first thing tomorrow. In return, I will only assess a 20 percent late penalty against your final grade. And one more thing.

DANIEL

Give me my paper, and I'll follow your instructions exactly.

DEX

That's the other thing. I don't have your paper any more. I was so disgusted by your behavior, I threw it in the trash, and, as you see, they've already collected my garbage.

DANIEL

It's not too late. They throw it all in that big dumpster by the cafeteria-- it'll be there until a truck comes for it over night.

DEX

I want a corrected version of that original. You'd crawl into a dumpster to get it?

DANIEL

No big thing-- I'll do it. You'll have the revision in the morning.

DEX

You'd crawl through all that nasty kitchen waste, the sour cole slaw and the freebie fries? It's dark in the dumpster. How will you see?

DANIEL

(leaving)

Don't worry about it.

DEX

Wait! I might have a flashlight in this locker someplace.

Daniel's voice trails down the hall.

DANIEL

I don't need it. Thanks, Dex. You won't regret it!

DEX

Uh-huh.

Dex gathers up some papers to grade and his leather gloves and puts them in the backpack. He takes a last look at the room, kills the lights, and exits, closing the door from the hallway. After a beat, we hear him rechecking the doorknob.

CUT TO

EXT. STAFF PARKING LOT - DAY

From below on the blacktop, we see Dex walking down a flight of stairs from the school's ground level. We hear screaming, shrill and desperate. Dex runs towards the dumpster. Asia and Zoraida are already near, as are Dr. Nuxtall and Mrs. Oneroff.

Flames lick out of the top of the dumpster. Someone is banging on the side door from inside the inferno. Putting on his leather gloves, Dex employs the custodian's trick to open the side panel. Flames burst through the opening. Dex reaches in and pulls out a burning body, heaving it to the ground. He slaps his gloves to put out the fire on them. Nuxtall comes close and they extinguish the flames on the body with their coats. Daniel's research paper flutters from Dex's pocket and bursts into flames. Asia moves closer.

DEX

Stay back, Asia! Don't look,
honey!

Asia retreats to the arms of Zoraida.

ASIA

Oh, God! It IS Daniel! I reco'nize
the melted 'Phillies Blunts' cap.

DEX

Move back, girls! Zoraida! Move
Asia back! Somebody call 911!

Other adults and students converge on the scene from various points, and they ring round the tragic tableau. A distant siren squeals.

BLACKOUT

INT. DEX'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

FADE IN

Dex is unconscious in the twin-sized bed. The digital clock shows '8:30 PM.' With a sudden spasm he wakes and reaches for the timepiece.

DEX

Sure, smart-ass! Eight-thirty, but what day is it?

Dex falls back and pulls the wool blanket over his face. He has another shuddering spasm.

DEX

Hungh! No--! I'm not going to think about that.

He turns on the TV with the remote, but stays under the blanket.

FIRST ANNOUNCER

...one of the most baffling and perhaps the most gruesome murder in the annals of U.S. crime.

SECOND ANNOUNCER

Warning! Tonight's presentation of 'Who Killed the Black Dahlia?' contains violent images that are unsuitable for children.

DEX

Shit!

Dex pokes his head out from under the cover and looks at the screen. A gruesome photo is shown, followed by handwritten texts.

FIRST ANNOUNCER

...several notes containing clues to the identity of the murderer. The crude and awkward sentences in these letters indicate to crime experts that they are complicated puzzles, not merely taunts to the LAPD.

DEX

Dear.. Detective: Stop.. Me..
Before.. I.. Spell.. Again!

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Dex shudders again violently. We hear loud knocking from the door downstairs.

DEX
Come in, Detective Guttyperch.
You're early.

Dex stands and the blanket falls away. He's been sleeping in his school suit, still charred from the fire, but his feet are bare.

DEX
(as von
Frankenstein)
It's alive!

CUT TO

INT. DEX'S PARLOUR - NIGHT

Dex comes down a staircase with no rail. His downstairs room contains an abandoned floor sander in a pile of sawdust. A light fixture of a kind that should be suspended from the ceiling sits amid dust bunnies on the floor, wires and hardware exposed. Boxes are stacked everywhere. A portable CD player is on a cardboard carton "end table" next to a leather recliner. Opposite is a leather couch.

DEX
Look at this dump. Don't these
people ever clean?

Dex crosses slowly to the front door. The knocking has stopped. He puts his ear to the door: nothing. He turns his back on the entrance. Suddenly, the pounding recommences, startling him.

DEX
Okay, okay. You found me. Just a
second.

Dex turns the key in the deadbolt lock and speaks before the door is fully opened.

DEX
With so many reasonable
alternatives, why come to me?

Cathy is there.

DEX
Surprise.

Dex turns his back on Cathy, retreats into the room, and flops into the recliner. Cathy enters.

DEX

Why are you here?

CATHY

No 'Happy to see you, Bubbie'? No,
'Come in, Bubbie'? No 'Have a
seat, darling'?

DEX

Have a seat, darling. Why are you
here?

Cathy sits on the dusty couch, trying to make herself small.

CATHY

I saw what happened at the high
school on TV. They called you a
hero for trying to save that kid.

DEX

He died anyway. I couldn't save
him. I couldn't save any of them.
I tried. I tried to make them
scholars. Instead, they'll end up
surly cashiers at the KnottsMart.

Dex buries his face in his hands. He shudders and groans.
Cathy puts her hand out across the intervening space, but
withdraws it without making contact.

CATHY

You did try, Dex. It was heroic.
You could have been burned
yourself.

DEX

I was wearing my oven mitts. It's
not a big deal.

CATHY

It's a very big deal. You left
before the news people arrived.
They all wanted to interview you.
My phone hasn't stopped ringing.
Why the hell didn't you give the
school your new number and take
mine off their records? You told
me you did that.

DEX

Okay.

CATHY

You can't keep going like this. You're very sick, Dex. Don't deny it. I recognize your depressions, by now. It's fucking dangerous for you to continue teaching kids when you can't take care of yourself. Are you suicidal? Tell me the truth. I know when you're lying.

DEX

No you don't!

CATHY

Right. But tell me anyway. Are you thinking about killing yourself?

DEX

I couldn't plan tonight's dinner, let alone a painless end to.. all of this.

CATHY

I'm scared for you, Dex. I really am. I don't see why you shouldn't take off a couple of weeks, a month, even. Or quit teaching completely. It's wrecking your health.

DEX

Why should I listen to you? Before I got sick, you hated the idea of me working at Rockland. You were disappointed I didn't make more money, that you were our main support, and you bitched like hell when I took work home. This quitting-- it's really no different than the same argument we've had since we married.

CATHY

Great! Then I don't need to rehash the reasons you should walk away. This quixotic crusade of yours. Just put an end to it. I mean, who cares? Who even knows how good you are in the classroom? That third floor of yours may as well be on the fucking moon.

DEX

Remember that joke of mine, when people looked at us together and asked if our differences were an obstacle in our marriage?

CATHY

Sure. You would say, 'Yes. We've had serious issues to overcome. My wife grew up with money, and I didn't.' It's never been so funny to me as to you.

She notices the wastebasket, where dozens of empty capsule blister packs are discarded.

CATHY

What are those? Pill wrappers?

DEX

I've had a cold.

CATHY

That's a hell of a cold. How long have you had it?

DEX

All year. Since we broke up. Those things have interesting side effects. A slight buzz, of course. And I can keep an erection for hours. The cough ingredient: it's an anti-spasmodic. Also, if I stop taking them, I'll sleep for three or four days.

CATHY

Oh, Dex. You're self-medicating again.

DEX

No, I consulted a doctor. Look, I appreciate your stopping by. My heart soars like a rabbit. But I'm good. Don't worry about me.

Cathy studies his face intently for a few moments.

CATHY

Okay. I believe you. You're going to pull yourself together. And you'll call me if things get so bad you start nose-diving into..

(MORE)

CATHY (cont'd)
despair or whatever.

DEX
Bubbie. You know how you hate it
when I come to you with my
problems.

CATHY
That's true, but call me anyway.

They rise and hug.

DEX
Wait, wait! Don't move.

He starts the CD player. The song is Elvis Costello's cover
of The Animals' "Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood." Dex
embraces her to dance. Cathy squirms, but relents.

CATHY
Not so close, Dex. Your clothes!
Don't get carried away. You'll
ruin the moment.

SINGER
'Baby, sometimes I'm so carefree/
With a joy that's hard to hide/
And sometimes it seems that all I
have to do is worry/ Then you're
bound to see my other side/ But
I'm just a soul whose intentions
are good/ Oh Lord, please don't
let me be misunderstood.'

CATHY
That's enough, I said! I have to
go, now.

They part. Cathy says goodbye kindly.

CATHY
Goodbye, Mr. Matherson.

DEX
Goodbye, Mrs. Matherson.

She leaves. Dex reacts, sad, lonely, hurting, his arms held
wide, remembering her touch.

FADE OUT

INT. CONFERENCE ROOM - DAY

Det. Guttyperch and Dex are squared up at the long conference table. The detective has a fingerprinting set and a notepad.

DEX

I can't believe you have the gall to accuse me of complicity in Daniel Spaniel's horrible death. Don't you watch TV?

DET. GUTTYPERCH

We'll come back to Spaniel. First, I want to hear about the death of Ruth Greenblatt.

DEX

You're kidding. Ruthie is dead? Last I knew she went hunting in mid-state. Was she gored by some grown-up Bambi? Was she tracked down by the Altoona chapter of PETA? What? Tell me.

DET. GUTTYPERCH

She was killed right here, at Rockland High, in the book storage room. A custodian found her body before school this morning. He went to investigate the smell.

DEX

Sure. A custodian. What possible reason would a Rockland High teacher have to visit the book room?

DET. GUTTYPERCH

But Ruth did visit it, in February, and my information says you went there with her. She was crushed to death under a cascade of falling book cases. Like LaRoger Whalley and Daniel Spaniel, you were the last person to see Ruth Greenblatt alive. I'm expecting to find out that you were alone with Brittany-Tiffany when she died, despite previous testimony that you left school right after the Art Museum bus returned.

(MORE)

DET. GUTTYPERCH (cont'd)
Come now, Matherson. Why don't you confess to these murders now, and save us all time and anxiety? Plead guilty to four counts of first degree manslaughter, and I give you my solemn vow, you'll get the help you need.

DEX
What the hell is that supposed to mean, 'the help I need'? Do you think I'm crazy?

DET. GUTTYPERCH
Your ex-wife..

DEX
Excuse me. We're still married.

DET. GUTTYPERCH
Oh. Your wife says you've been under treatment for (reads) 'short-cycle, mixed-state bipolar disorder' for years. You've had psychotic episodes. Turn yourself in and we'll get you the best help available.

DEX
I'm not going to take credit for something I didn't do. Those kids, the coroner said they were accidental victims. No human intent was evidenced.

DET. GUTTYPERCH
The coroner will revisit those cases based on new evidence. Because Ms. Greenblatt's death was definitely not an accident. We found palm and shoe prints on the lead book case. That unit was positively pushed over by someone. I'm going to take some prints from you, and I bet they'll indicate your responsibility for Ruth Greenblatt's death.

DEX
Oh, come on! Your prints might prove I was in the book room at some point in the last nine years, but they can't prove what happened
(MORE)

DEX (cont'd)
on a particular Friday.

DET. GUTTYPERCH
You'd be surprised, what with our
new crime scene technologies, how
much information can be gained
from the calibrated depth of
decades-old layers of dust. We can
tell when a print was made by how
much dust has settled on it since.

DEX
So! You do watch TV.
'Depth-of-dust calibration.' You
just made that up, didn't you?
C'mon, tell the truth and shame
the devil.

After a brief stare-down with Dex, Det. Guttyperch ducks his
head under the table to look at the teacher's shoes.

DET. GUTTYPERCH
Those are Mephisto walking shoes,
aren't they, Matherson? High-end
footwear. For your money you get a
very distinctive footprint.
(Straightening) I'm betting your
fancy-ass shoes match the tracks
in the book room precisely.

DEX
Even if you have evidence I was
there when Ruthie died, you can
never prove what was going on in
my head.

DET. GUTTYPERCH
Maybe not. No matter. I have other
evidence that pins you to the
dumpster tragedy. We know gasoline
intensified the fire. And everyone
knows you had a chainsaw in school
yesterday. That gas must have come
from your Husqvarna.

DEX
Excuse me? Gas from my what, now?
There's other power equipment on
campus.

DET. GUTTYPERCH

(From notes)

Two mowers, a weed whacker, a leaf-blower, and a trash-munching Goat.

DEX

How much of the leftover gas in those power tools was disposed of in the dumpster?

DET. GUTTYPERCH

I have 'zero percent.'

DEX

Zero. I see. Then no one poured out gas to clean his machine. No rags were soaked in the maintenance of these mowers and other exotic tools. Zero. That's the percentage you found for gas that was not used and not returned to the main tank. Zero. You're going to build a case against the heroic teacher who risked his life to save Daniel Spaniel, and your prime piece of evidence is 'ZERO'? Won't the moms and pops in Manayunk feel cheated when they find out you looked and looked and all you could come up with was 'zero'? Finding zero is the same as finding nothing! Is this the brand of nihilism with which you intend to mock the good citizens of Ridge Avenue?

DET. GUTTYPERCH

Did you have heated words with Daniel Spaniel yesterday because you intended to fail him for the marking period?

DEX

Yup.

DET. GUTTYPERCH

And did he threaten you with incriminating evidence in this graphic?

Guttyperch produces a copy of the "Inquisitor's Card."

DEX

He made that boneheaded play, yes he did.

DET. GUTTYPERCH

And what was the incriminating evidence he showed you?

DEX

Nothing he showed me was damaging to me in the least. That's just hallway detritus that happens to have my initials on it upside-down.

DET. GUTTYPERCH

I wouldn't say this graphic has nothing to incriminate you. The gold crown that becomes the '3' in your room number, 318, that's a good one. In the reverse view, the crown becomes a chair, a distinctive chair with three claw-shaped casters, just like the one at your desk, the only chair like it in the whole school.

DEX

A chimerical concoction like this suggests a slew of forced conclusions, but means nothing. It's like The Beatles and 'who buried Paul?' Let's get high and decipher the funeral procession on the jacket of 'Abbey Road' or play 'Revolution #9' backwards.

I'll tell you what I see when I look at this trifle: I see a man, both jester and interrogator, swinging between two poles of personality, one affable, the other threatening. He tries to see, to penetrate that which is closed to him, yet through all his travails, that which he is seeking and that which obscures his vision are one and the same. To be blunt about it: I see you, Detective Guttyperch.

Dex looks at his watch and rises to his feet.

DET. GUTTYPERCH

Where the hell do you think you're going? I need to make prints of your fingers and palm. I need to make a print of those Mephisto shoes.

DEX

Since you can't arrest me, I've wasted enough time with you. My fingerprints are on file with state agencies and the FBI, such is the regard with which society treats its teachers. As for my shoe print, here you go--

Dex takes the graphic and puts it on the floor. He puts his sole on the paper, producing a perfect print. He exits. Guttyperch flips the steel lid of his notebook closed.

DET. GUTTYPERCH

Geez! What a grouch!

FADE OUT

INT. DEX'S CLASSROOM - DAY

Dex has his head down on his desk, the Foghorn Leghorn mug loosely in his hand. He doesn't react when Zofya enters and approaches.

ZOFYA

Dex? Are you all right?

His body jerks, spilling a dollop of his drink.

DEX

Hunnh? Oh, Zofya. Sorry. You startled me. What's up?

ZOFYA

I have great news.

DEX

Don't tell me. That letter of recommendation I wrote for you did the trick. Your college scholarship is guaranteed.

ZOFYA

No, no. Nothing like that. I'm pregnant.

DEX

Pregnant with ideas, yes. And I'm the daddy.

ZOFYA

Don't even joke about it. I mean I'm going to have a baby. Isn't it fabulous?

DEX

Oh, no! Zofya! Child, what have you done? Does your family know?

ZOFYA

Yes, and they aren't too happy about it. In my faith, this is like the worst thing a girl can do. But they'll get over it. I thought at least my favorite teacher would be happy for me.

DEX

I'm sorry. It's just that-- Don't you realize how difficult it will be for you to accomplish your academic goals, senior year, college after that, plus take care of a baby? How about the child's father? Can you count on support from him?

ZOFYA

He's not in the picture. I've got to deal with it on my own.

Dex taps his head on the desktop. He sits upright and takes a swig from the mug. He drags his finger through the spill and licks it.

DEX

When are you due? We have to come up with a strategy whereby your schoolwork for the final marking period is complete by the time the baby arrives. 'Baby arrives.' I never realized what a silly euphemism that is. It's already here, i'n't?

ZOFYA

The thing is, it took me a while to accept my circumstances, and now I'm in my final trimester. I know, I know. I should have

(MORE)

ZOFYA (cont'd)
started planning before this.

DEX
Yes, planning. Didn't you read our school district's informative and entertaining pamphlets on the subject? They distribute them with the freebie Tastykakes at the student entrance.

ZOFYA
I'm not going to finish the school year.

DEX
Then, you'll make up the marking period when you're able. It's a setback, but you'll manage. I know you will.

ZOFYA
Listen, Dex. I have a better plan. It would be a waste of time for me to repeat the last marking period. My idea is that you should assume I would have worked up to my usual excellent standards if I were here, and give me an 'A' based on my past performance. Then I can put this year behind me, preserve my four-point-oh transcript, and graduate with my class next year.

DEX
No. Absolutely not. I haven't 'given' a grade to any student, ever! This isn't the Dodge 'Em cars at Rehobeth Beach, where you measure up to Foghorn Leghorn's outstretched hand and automatically pass. I construe ability from performance.

ZOFYA
What's that medicine-y smell?

DEX
Dr. Pepper?

Dex takes another sip and moves the mug farther away.

DEX

What would they say in the office if I gave you credit for work you never accomplished? Maybe you don't mind success under false pretenses, but I'm not going to part with my conscience so readily. Rockland High expects the best from me.

ZOFYA

No, they don't. I mean, I've already talked to Dr. Wimple and the roster office. They leave it entirely to your discretion.

DEX

This is turning into a nightmare.

ZOFYA

Dex, you're impossible!

DEX

Because I require a student who gets an 'A' in my class to actually attend it?

ZOFYA

What if you just mail me the work I'm missing? I could do it at home when the baby comes. I don't think I should have to-- this situation isn't really my fault-- but you could E-mail me or phone me with my assignments.

DEX

You want to phone it in. This class isn't portable. The full picture of our studies requires face-to-face interaction between students, and between students and teacher. You're an integral part of a complex process that can't be phoned or mailed anywhere. What would you think of me if I abandoned my principles?

ZOFYA

Are you serious? I would think you were the greatest teacher (doing Ali) 'of all times!' I'd name my child after you.

DEX

'Spineless' is a terrible name to burden an innocent child with. Look, I can compromise. You get a '60' for the last marking period. Averaged in with your other sterling credits, it comes out to a 'B'. What's wrong with that?

ZOFYA

It's wrong because you know I'm not a 'B' student. I deserve an 'A'.

DEX

Here's a free life lesson for you. Nobody gets what they deserve, except in fiction. Phillies and Yankees fans know this practically from birth.

ZOFYA

I can't argue about it any more. Miss Oneroff sent me a note. A police detective down in the office wants to talk to me. He wants to go over what happened when Brittany-Tiffany got squashed.

DEX

What do you know about it?

ZOFYA

I know that even though they think you weren't in the building, I saw you follow Tiff up here. I know you didn't make the window fall, Dex. You wouldn't do that. But I know you didn't tell the truth about where you were when Tiffany got iced.

DEX

Hmm. Thanks at least for not believing I'm a killer. Did you tell anyone else what you saw?

ZOFYA

Of course not. You have your principles and I have mine. I don't dime out friends. We are friends, right?

DEX

What a crappy year this has been, these accidents and my being so close to them. I feel like I'm being haunted by Rockland High School itself. Because it never was about the students or the teachers with me. I'm haunted by the very idea of public schools, the promise of a shared culture. And I hear the school calling out for its due. Howling for-- what? For justice?

All right, friend. Here's what we'll do-- I'm going to devise an alternative assignment for you, something real, not just busy work, and whatever you get on it, that'll be your final marking period grade.

ZOFYA

Oh, bless you.

DEX

Too late for that. Your class has wrung from our reading everything it's going to get from the post-Civil War period. We're going forward, the Harlem Renaissance. I'm assigning you a research paper that you will present in class and that will provide a backdrop for our studies.

ZOFYA

Nothing too long, I hope. A new mother has lots of responsibilities.

DEX

Oh, jeez. Give you an inch, right? This assignment is as long as it needs to be. And here it is. The same societal forces that created the Harlem Renaissance attended the creation of this high school, get it? I want you to write about the early history of Rockland High itself. This building went up in the 20's. I want you to research the public debate of that time surrounding its construction.

(MORE)

DEX (cont'd)

Building a new school is always controversial. Who were the policymakers back then? What was the mission of the school? And they had intense fighting between different ethnic groups then as now.

I don't want you to stop there. Consider the physical plant. Who designed the school and what were the important functions envisioned in its architecture? The story is fascinating. For instance, Rockland was named for a rocky hill and this school was built on top of it. For decades this was the home of a widely known, real-life hermit, a holy man of the woods, and that's why the next street over is called Hermitage Lane. Great stuff. You'll need 15 to 20 sources and footnotes for everything.

ZOFYA

This sounds like a lot of work. I'm not complaining, but--

DEX

Not so long, not really. You should be able to knock out the whole thing by the time we return from spring break, eleven days from now. And I'm going to give you a major chunk of it today, right now.

He shuffles objects in the locker and comes up with a long, metallic flashlight.

ZOFYA

What's this head start you're giving me?

DEX

Ah-ha! I know you don't know it, nobody but the building engineer and myself know about it, but there's a secret passageway that runs the length of the school, a service tunnel that's part of the water and heating system. I found

(MORE)

DEX (cont'd)

out about it by accident. This tunnel, which has its only entrance in the custodian's office, runs between the exterior facade and the main hallway. For one thing, it means that Rockland's walls are enormously thick, like a medieval castle. You can actually peer into the classrooms through the air vents from there. I want you to go inside it, study the antique gauges and pressure valves, that sort of thing, and make notes on what you find. Interested?

ZOFYA

Sure, Dex. If you say so.

DEX

We have to get to the custodian's office, and I don't want us to run in to anyone on our way there, if you know what I mean. You wouldn't happen to know a safe passage, some students-only route that will take us to the building's other side?

ZOFYA

Ahhh! That's OUR secret passage. We can go down the fire tower to the first floor and get to your service tunnel from the kitchen.

DEX

See the secrets this building conceals? I thought the fire towers were sealed. For that matter, what the hell is a 'fire tower' anyway? Look, while I gather a few items I need to take home, you scope out the hall and make sure we won't run into anyone.

Zofya steps into the hall. Dex grabs a heavy coat and puts it on. He shoves an American literature anthology into his backpack, along with a flashlight. Lastly, he spikes his Foghorn Leghorn mug with half a bottle of cough syrup from his lower desk drawer. Carrying the mug, he enters the hall.

CUT TO

INT. FIRE TOWER - DAY

Dex and Zofya enter the dimly lit tower. The stone walls are covered in colorful streams of graffiti. They descend the worn stairs.

DEX

What was that move you made to open the door?

ZOFYA

That's what they call English, teach. Body English.

Elsewhere, a spooky howling emanates.

DEX

What the hell was that?

ZOFYA

Maybe it's that howling you alone can hear, angry spirits of Rockland's past. Seriously, they're real, Dex, not in your head. Ooh-oo-oo-oooh! That be the chil'en 'illin'. Some kids is letting us know that they know we're here.

DEX

That smell! It's weed.

ZOFYA

Of course. What good's a fire tower without a little fire?

More spooky howling swirls in the smoky air, only closer and louder.

DEX

Fire tower. I get it. They bring fire, not extinguish it, like the book burners in 'Fahrenheit 451.'

ZOFYA

Forget it, Dex. Your literary references will avail you nothing, here. This is the frontier. Outlaws rule.

As the pair turn the last landing and face the exit, it closes just ahead of them.

ZOFYA

I hope we can get out, now. Those guys know how to block the door from opening if they want.

Zofya kicks the door which comes back a teeny bit in the frame. Deftly she grabs the exposed lip of the door and pulls it open.

ZOFYA

We're in luck. Hold this open.

Dex takes the door while Zofya goes ahead. He looks at a pile of burnt paper, book covers and rags in the corner at his feet. He sees and picks up a playing card, a four of spades with a burnt edge.

DEX

'Four of swords': retreat and repose. The fortress of solitude.

ZOFYA

It's okay. We've got a clear shot to the janitor's office.

CUT TO

INT. BUILDING ENGINEER'S OFFICE - DAY

The pair enters a small room, crowded with a desk, built-in oak cabinets, and other 80-years-old furnishings. A porcelain-coated, hatch-like door with a handle like that on an old-time refrigerator is set in a wall.

DEX

What luck! Nobody's home. Even the custodian has cleared out for the start of vacation. Hey, look what I found.

ZOFYA

Another playing card. I don't know how you do that.

DEX

No es nada. Why do you think they call me 'Dex'? Here's the secret entrance I told you about. It looks like the hatch on a Jack 'n' Jill ice cream truck. Nothing but

(MORE)

DEX (cont'd)
Rocket Pops and Nutty Buddies
inside.

Dex opens the hatch.

DEX
Now, I'll need to hold it open, or
it will shut by itself. You can't
open the hatch from the inside.
Should it close on you, you'd be
trapped in there for two weeks.

Dex takes the flashlight from his pack. Zofya steps into the
tunnel, then pokes her head back into the office.

ZOFYA
You aren't going to pull some
stunt like locking me in here, are
you?

DEX
Trust me.

CUT TO

INT. SERVICE TUNNEL - DAY

The service tunnel is nearly lightless except when it runs
past one of the classroom air vents and dim patches of light
endure. Twin, cast iron pipes run its length, supported by
cinder blocks. An occasional scrabbling sound may be heard,
rats at work. Dex's flashlight provides spot light when
required. We see over Zofya's back, through the hatch
opening, into the office, where Dex leans in.

DEX
What we'll do is, I'll wait here
in case the custodian returns or
someone else tries to close the
hatch.

ZOFYA
Oh..my..God! You mean I have to go
in there alone?

DEX
You'll take my trusty flish with
you. C'mon, this is nothing for
such as yourself, born and raised
in Strawberry Mansion. Besides,
throwing a little scare into you
is my revenge for making me change
(MORE)

DEX (cont'd)
your grade.

ZOFYA
Okay. Give me a second to summon
my steely nerve. (Pause.) All
right. Got my notebook and pen.
I'm ready. Give me the flashlight.

DEX
Go in deep enough to see how the
system works. Find a couple of
those steam pressure gauges, a
classroom vent, and write your
notes on the spot.

Zofya passes the camera into the dark. We see her beam of
light.

ZOFYA
Yo, Dex. Whassup with your
flashlight? The dark swallows the
beam inches ahead of me. This
isn't so bad, really. Not so
spooky as I thought, but damp and
chilly. It's really bangin'!

DEX
See! I told you.

ZOFYA
And I love the way your voice
rumbles down the tunnel. Helloooo!
Doesn't that sound cool?

DEX
Awesome.

ZOFYA
I just found one of those pressure
thingies. Antique! Here's a
release valve. Big honkin' handle.
I'm going deeper in. Can you still
hear me, Dex?

Dex holds the hatch open with one hand while reaching for
the custodian's chair with the other. He uses it to prop
open the hatch, and then he stealthily enters the tunnel
himself. Quietly, he makes his way down the passage. About
20 feet in, beyond the range of the light from the door, he
stops by a niche along the wall, behind the pipes. Dex steps
over the pipes cautiously. He slumps to the base of the
wall, covers his face and hands, and waits.

ZOFYA

Yo, Dex! I have to come back now. This dopey flashlight of yours is burning out. The only way I can get back is to follow the hatch light at the proverbial end of the tunnel. I wrote plenty of notes, enough to hang a report on.

Zofya passes Dex without seeing him.

ZOFYA

I had a great idea about using the tunnel as a metaphor. Which angle is best? Secret passageway into the fortress of knowledge or underground railroad to freedom? What do you think? Dex?

Dex moves deeper into the niche, a chamber joining the main tunnel at a forty-five degree angle. A vent to the building's exterior provides dim light. In its glow, Dex takes off his heavy coat and lays it on the dirt ground. He removes the literature anthology from the pack and bundles the pack into a plausible pillow. He opens the anthology to a dog-eared page, the frontispiece of 'Moby Dick.' Satisfied with the available light, he reclines, Foghorn Leghorn by his head.

Zofya reaches the hatch and pokes her head into the office.

ZOFYA

Deh-ex? You promised you wouldn't do anything corny, like leap out of the shadows and say 'Boo!' or nothing. I don't believe in no ghosts. That's your affliction.

She tries to see into the hall outside the office, but spooks and retreats back inside the tunnel.

ZOFYA

Maybe the custodian returned and you had to go out to talk to him and give me time to get back. I bet that's what happened.

From inside the tunnel, we see Zofya crawl over the chair into the office. She removes the chair to the desk, holding the hatch open.

ZOFYA

What a guy! Better close the
freezer door so no one knows we
were messing around inside.

Checking the hall again, she slowly closes the hatch,
careful it should not make too much noise when the locking
handle catches. The camera finds Dex, confirming that he can
hear Zofya and what she is doing.

ZOFYA

Don't worry, Dex, my dear, dear
old head. It'll be like you were
never here.

The hatch locks.

BLACKOUT

The closing credits roll.

The End