

Home Visit

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4782 Menson Avenue was a small place with a dead lawn. Past the brittle grass where toys lay scattered, the house stood with peeling pink paint and a roof missing several clay shingles. Jennifer checked the address in her notebook, entered through a creaking gate, and walked to the door. In the patio's shade, she straightened her skirt and picked lint off her shoulder. She knocked and waited. Principal Henley's words echoed in her head: *Everything begins with the home visit.*

A young woman with a baby on her hip opened the door. Jennifer noticed stains on her aqua-green scrubs and bags under her eyes.

"Good morning. You must be Mrs. Vilch."

"Ms. Vilch," the woman corrected. "And you are?" She shifted her baby to the opposite hip. Somewhere came the smell of vomit.

"Jennifer Politano, or Ms. Politano," she said. "We spoke on the phone, I'm—"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, the new teacher, that's right. Come on in." She left the door ajar and turned into a dark hallway.

Jennifer followed her through the entryway into a well-lit kitchenette. At the center stood a wooden table with the remains of breakfast. The stench of bile was replaced by the sweet aroma of maple syrup, and Jennifer, as politely as she could, commented on the loveliness of the home.

"Yup, a real castle," Ms. Vilch said, picking up a piece of waffle, biting into it, then tossing it back onto the plate. "Coffee?" she asked with her mouth full.

“No thank you,” she said. Principal Henley’s voice entered her head: *Never decline anything, it’s rude.* “Actually, a small cup would be nice.”

As Ms. Vilch poured her coffee, little details of the room caught Jennifer’s eye—discolored wallpaper here, crumbs on the floor there, torn coupons scattered about the counter like an upturned puzzle—and while a story began to formulate in her mind, another warning from her boss emerged: *Careful to check your privilege at the door, it is not your job to make assumptions or judgements.*

“They’re really robbing the cradle, aren’t they?”

“I’m sorry?”

“No reason to be sorry. You just look young for a teacher.”

She was right. Jennifer had just earned her credential, accepting a job offer after an interview and a sample lesson. Yet, it had been a long road to get to this house—exams, observations, student teaching without pay, immunizations, background checks—and now she was here, attempting to pass another hurdle.

“What an adorable baby,” Jennifer said. She took a sip and set her coffee down, and without really wanting to asked, “May I hold her?”

“Please, my back is killing me..”

Jennifer took the baby and bounced her lightly. Ms. Vilch sat down and began tying her hair into a knot. Grease seemed to shimmer from her forehead. For a moment, nothing was said. Jennifer began to wonder about the girl. *Engage the conversation, but don’t be too pushy,* rang Principal Henley’s words.

“So what is this?” Ms. Vilch asked.

“I’m sorry?”

“Jesus, you are sorry a lot.”

Ms. Vilch sighed like a woman who had been up all night emptying bed pans. And she likely had been, Jennifer mused.

Ms. Vilch went on, "You know, this, you being here, the school's never had teachers come here before. There's some catch I'm sure. Is it money? Does the school need money?"

"No, not at all, nothing like that, I assure you."

In fact, these visits were only mandatory for new faculty, meant to build relationships before the start of the school year. Jennifer tried to remember if any teachers had come to her house as a child.

"Just call me Giselle. It's too hot and early to be polite."

For a moment, Jennifer nearly forgot about the baby in her arms, who had a swamp of saliva at the corners of her mouth. She wiped the baby's face without thinking. "Alright, Giselle then."

Outside the kitchen window she could see the surrounding neighborhood. Few trees sprouted along the sidewalks, and in the distance, beyond the sprawl of the smog-smothered skyscrapers, a mirage of mountain ranges stood in ghostly heat waves. Somewhere among all that mess of buildings was Franklin Academy.

"So what's the deal? Is this some new Trump initiative? Sending schoolteachers to homes to spy on parents?"

"What? No, of course not. That's insane."

"Speaking of insane, what happened to Ms. Jones? Heard she cracked or something, couldn't handle the pressure of a 2nd grade class."

The old teacher. *If asked about Ms. Jones, tell them she moved on to another school.*

Giselle's large, vein-streaked eyes looked Jennifer up and down. Speechless, Jennifer shifted the baby to her other arm.

“Gets heavy, huh? Let me take her.”

Jennifer handed back the baby. She thought about her last meeting with Principal Henley. He had sat behind his desk, broad-shouldered yet hunched like a man who had carried too much weight over the years. He had proven himself in the classroom, received accolades, and now was the leader of Franklin Academy. He would probably be superintendent one day. She supposed she respected him, but only because she was supposed to.

“Look, the only reason I am here is to meet you and your daughter, go over any questions you have, and make an action plan so little Carly is given all the support she needs.”

“And why would she need support?”

Jennifer paused, retracing her words, and saw how they could be misconstrued.

“Well, all children have individualized needs, Ms. Vil-Giselle.”

“Are you saying my Carly’s dumb?”

The air in the sunshine-lit kitchen seemed as thick as syrup, and Jennifer could feel the blood rushing to her cheeks. The baby began to cry and the sweet maple smell was overtaken by the odor of a soiled diaper. A patter of feet entered the kitchen, and Jennifer looked up to find a little girl standing in the archway.

Dressed in pink pajamas with printed unicorns, Carly stood holding a naked Barbie doll with tangled hair. Jennifer could see the stains of syrup on her cheeks, and she found this comforting in some way. For a seven-year-old, Carly was tall. Lanky and thin, she stood with perfectly trimmed bangs the color of coffee.

“Wow, mama, she is beautiful,” Carly said, walking into the kitchen, holding the doll by her hair. She joined them at the table, wide-eyed

and seemingly unabashed about having a stranger in her home. Jennifer noticed the Barbie was missing an arm.

“What happened to your doll there?” Jennifer asked.

“Surgery,” Carly replied. “Are you my new teacher? The old one was kinda crazy, yelled a lot, rolled her eyes, acted like she was the smartest lady in the world. Are you like her? I hope not. Hey, nice shoes you got!”

Carly was under the table, examining Jennifer’s shoes when Ms. Vilch peeked into her baby’s diaper and, finding the source of odor, hastily carried her off into another room.

“Wait—” Jennifer chirped.

“Be back in a minute!” Ms. Vilch called from down the hall.

Jennifer felt a pinch at her ankles.

“Who is Lou Bootoon?” the girl said, running her finger along the words printed on the insole.

“Huh? Who? Wait. Carly, can I talk to you for a minute? I’d really like to get to know you.”

The girl handed the shoe back and grabbed Jennifer by the hand. “Come,” she said, “come see my room.”

Out of the kitchen, through the mildewed hallway, and past a room where Jennifer could see Ms. Vilch changing the baby’s diaper, they arrived at a door decorated with stickers. The girl pushed it open, revealing a small bedroom with a bed on one side and a crib on the other. Toys and stuffed animals lay scattered across the carpet, a coloring book with scribbles was on the bed, and clothes were thrown about, some in little mounds pushed against the wall.

Carly leapt onto her bed, knocking the coloring book to floor. She sang, “One little monkey jumping on the bed, one fell off and bumped her head!”

Jennifer imaged thirty Carlys doing the same thing on the desks of her classroom.

“Carly, how about you come here and tell me what it is you like to do in school.”

The girl leapt from the bed and grabbed Jennifer’s hand. “Come, come meet Goldie.”

On a dresser where clothes hung out like tongues, a bowl of water stood. Inside, a fish swam back and forth, trapped by walls of glass. Carly reached and took the bowl in her hands. The water ebbed and flowed, nearly spilling from the top as she held it up to Jennifer.

“This is Goldie,” she said. “Dadda won him at the carnival for me, throwing baseballs into a clown’s mouth.”

“And where is your dad?” Jennifer heard herself ask. *Remember you are there to build relationships, not be an inquisitor*, Principal Henley’s words echoed.

The girl thought for a second and said, “He is probably with Uncle Bernie, drinking brewskees. They like to watch sports and yell. Sometimes Uncle Bern comes here. He brings me Hot Wheels cars, but cars are for boys.”

“So, what do you like to read, Carly?” The questions came out forced, and Jennifer knew it. She saw several books on a small shelf and pulled one out. “Maybe you could read me one?”

The girl scrunched her face as if she had been offered a bowl of vegetables.

“Come on, it will be fun,” Jennifer said. She sat cross-legged in the center of the room, opening the book on her lap. “Look, I’ll start.” She pressed her finger to the page and read. Soon, Carly was by her side,

reading along and laughing. Jennifer smiled, and a certain serenity came over her. It was moments like these, so small and fleeting, that inspired her to be a teacher.

When the last line was read, Carly jumped to her feet and grabbed another book called *When the Wind Wept*. Jennifer could see it was a book all about personification. And alliteration, she supposed.

“When the wind wept, the sun smiled, and the clouds crowded close together,” Carly read. On the page, the natural elements all had faces. The sun was a man, of course. The wind was a woman, her long blowing hair drawn with almost transparent lines. Yelling erupted from the other room.

“Dadda’s home,” Carly said without looking up from the book. “Whenever wind was weeping, the sun shined so...”

Jennifer heard a man’s voice boom, “This is my house!” And over the baby’s cries came Giselle shushing, “Don’t embarrass us, the teacher’s here.”

It’s not your job to judge them, Jennifer could hear Principal Henley say again.

“Wind wailed when rain roared...”

“Listen, Carly, I should go check on your mother.”

“But then tree trapped rain and wind whirred...”

The arguing ended with the sharp slam of a door.

Jennifer stood, peered out the bedroom window, and witnessed a man staggering away. Before reaching the gate he kicked a toy doll and it flew out of the yard. All the while, Carly read as if nothing was happening at all.

“Just keep reading, Carly,” Jennifer said, heading for the door.

"You'll come back, right?"

"Of course I will."

She followed the baby's cries into another bedroom down the hallway. There, at the far end of the room, Giselle embraced the baby, cooing calm words into her ear. Jennifer stood in the doorway, realizing she didn't know what to do or say.

"What you looking at?" Giselle said. The room was dark and her face was in shadows.

"I wanted to make sure everything's okay."

"Of course you do," she said. "Big, smart teacher comes here, so high, so mighty. You want to fix us? You think because you went to school that you know everything?"

Jennifer stammered. "I just wanted to help—"

Giselle let out a raucous laugh. "Help? Yeah, you can help yourself out of here and never come back, how's that sound, you bitch? How dare you."

The baby's shrieking continued as Ms. Vilch held her tightly, bobbing side to side. Stepping back, Jennifer stood at the threshold between rooms. Down the hall, she could hear Carly reading *When the Wind Wept*, and in front of her, Giselle clutched her youngest, dancing a kind of sad waltz in the darkness. There was also the front door, sunbeams shining through its tiny rectangular windows like headlights. Jennifer listened for Principal Henley, but he said nothing. And although she didn't fully understand it yet, and would face it many times in the years ahead, Jennifer had entered a gray territory, a place where the teacher must helplessly stand aside.

The door closed behind her and she was outside again with the unrelenting heat. When she neared the gate, Jennifer looked over her

shoulder. The blinds rattled behind the living room window, and she thought she could see Carly's eyes peering through the slits. Jennifer raised her hand to wave, but the blinds stilled and she was left with her palm in the air, fingers extended, as if pressing against a wall of glass. □