

TEACHING WILL: WHAT SHAKESPEARE AND 10 KIDS GAVE ME THAT HOLLYWOOD COULDN'T
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Chapter XIV WAR DECLARED

When have I injur'd thee? When done thee wrong?
Or thee? or thee? or any of your faction?

A plague upon you all!

Richard III Act I, Scene III

Room 15 has been yanked from us, and we've been temporarily sent back to the library. Repairs of some sort have rendered us homeless, and my stomach is tight. I don't want to return to the library, where pillows flew last autumn. But here we are, gathered around tables to read the play.

"What?" Carla cries. "From the beginning *again*? We already did that!"

"Rehearsal means going back over parts we've done. It's common for actors to do this. This is how we become more familiar with the story."

"But we haven't even finished acting to the end," Stella moans.

"That's correct, but we can't block the play here in the library, so we're going to read it, no arguments. Even though we can't walk around in here, how about you stand when you speak? Let's make the goal of today's rehearsal to really talk to each other like real people in real life."

I've placed their scripts where I want them to sit because I'm hyper-aware of the continuing animosities between certain kids. Dana has ducked behind a bookshelf with Miles on the other side. She crams herself behind the half-wall and speaks past him, not to him. They look like characters in an espionage thriller sharing a veiled exchange. Dana appears to do this for my benefit, giving me a conspiratorial nod.

Is she trying to signal something? I'm going to ignore her for the moment.

However, the gauntlet has been thrown, and I make a private note. There will be no "really talking to each other like real people" because Dana and Miles refuse to even look at each other.

We meander our way through a dismal stumble-through. The mood has been set by Dana's stubbornness, and nearly everyone picks up on it. Marin mumbles her lines, Stella refuses to shut up while others are speaking, and Miles eyes the bottoms of the tables. He slides down his chair, eyes on me, and just as his butt is about to touch the floor, I shake my head. Like a spool of film in rewind, he scoots back up, smirking.

Candace has ignored our verbal deal of “no pouting” and maintains an indifference to both me and the play. Jordan whispers Demetrius’ lines, rendering last week’s breakthrough moot. Grace, Regina, and Carla giggle, tickle, and kick each other. Jennifer has subdued her voice again, and we’re once more dependent on Anna’s professional demeanor to hold on to a tattered plot.

The library is a boiler room of frustrated energy as adversaries claim their territory.

Handing out pencils and colored pens, I hope we can at least accomplish some journal writing. Next week, back in Room 15, we’ll find our groove with a proper rehearsal.

As the meeting draws to a close, I collect scripts and pack the Shakespeare Club box. Because I’m busy, the kids take the opportunity to go berserk and crawl underneath desks and inside reading cubicles, where they scream, shriek, and do everything but write. Anna, alone, remains writing at her table. The rest have launched an all-out war.

Dana rises from behind a wall and hurls a paper ball at Miles. She’s used paper ripped from her journal, and fury blazes through me like wildfire. I have shopped so carefully for these notebooks, and now they’re making garbage out of them along with the pens and scripts and time and parties and movies and popcorn... *Where the hell is the gratitude?*

“Stop! Stop it right now and get back to your seats!”

From each cubicle, like brats in foxholes, they peer back, grinning. I don’t grin back. They’re not adorable, and I’m completely fed up.

“Dana, drop the paper! Now!” I glare at her.

Dana makes a grave mistake.

“But Ms. Ryane, the little kids were throwing balls at me and I didn’t do anything.”

“Dana, I’m a lot of things, but I’m not an idiot and I’m certainly not blind.”

“No, Ms. Ryane, I wasn’t doing anything!”

“Dana, I saw you. I’m right here in front of you. I saw you throw the paper, so don’t even *try* to claim otherwise.”

Big tears fill her eyes, and I’m astonished as she sticks with her story.

“No, Ms. Ryane, the little kids were throwing paper, but I wasn’t.”

Rage courses through me. I take a breath and take aim directly into her watery orbs.

“Dana, you’re lying to me. I saw you throw the paper, which means you ripped up your journal to do it. I saw you, so you cannot tell me you didn’t do it. I’m not saying no one else did the same thing, but I’m *telling* you I *saw* you.”

“But, Ms. Ryane, really, it wasn’t me...” She trails behind me as I turn away, motioning for everyone to get up, get their stuff, and get out.

I remember an earlier discussion about how Mr. Davis had kicked her out of choir because “he said I *did* and I *didn’t*,” and I recall how bad I felt for her that day. How she seemed so misunderstood. I believed her. I urged her to talk to Mr. Davis and iron things out. I bought her crap story complete with those ready-for-my-close-up droplets falling from her eyes.

Dana is duplicitous, and she may carry the DNA of Richard III, but today, she shares the stage with another formidable actor. I’m instantly plucked out of Oz and my romantic notions of a little project called the Shakespeare Club. My initiation is complete. As the scope of this young girl’s deception dawns on me, I feel foolish and naive.

If teachers drink, I now know why. Kids aren’t cute.

In seventh grade, one of our subjects was Library, a period spent listening to our school librarian trill arias on the Dewey Decimal System. Mrs. Felton, a slight woman, fluttered her dry, bony hands as she sang the praises of Salinger and Steinbeck. I have no idea why, but occasionally, Mrs. Felton would get me out of math to work in the library. Which was fantastic, since I hated math. And science, and history, and gym, among other subjects.

Mrs. Felton set me up in a large closet with the task of copying illustrations of Laura Ingalls Wilder’s homesteaders or Beatrix Potter’s bunnies onto poster board using an overhead projector. This effort required absolutely no talent. I simply traced what the projector illuminated. After a picture was finished, Mrs. Felton would *oooh* and *aaah* before hanging it on the wall.

I was thrilled Mrs. Felton chose me to do this. It was as if the hand of God himself had rescued me from the studies I despised. Alone in that dark closet with only the light from the projector and its comforting whirr, I traced and painted.

Mrs. Felton gave me a gift for which I showed no gratitude. To seventh graders, Library was a free period, a party class, a chance to gossip, slouch, spew bad language, and create mayhem.

Cutouts of the Beatles and David Cassidy covered our notebooks. Girls decorated theirs with hearts and curlicues, boys with lightning bolts and 3-D block letters spelling out the names of various narcotics. We scrawled *peace* across every surface. Ask Mrs. Felton if we had an iota what *peace* meant as we posed with our fingers in the V symbol.

Testosterone and other renegade hormones pinged off bookshelves as if we were all caught inside a giant pinball machine. And she was trapped with us, poor, banged-up, pathetic Mrs. Felton and her whimsical fantasies of teaching eager children the merits of fine literature.

Is this what Mrs. Felton imagined when she graduated with degrees in education and library science?

“Quiet and order,” she warbled in a voice straining to overcome our thunderous din.

One afternoon, Mrs. Felton was hit with one too many spitballs, and she combusted. With our rowdiness reaching a screeching pinnacle, Mrs. Felton crumpled into her chair with forehead cupped in her hands. She shrank, tinier and tinier, behind a desk that looked to engulf her. Tears flowed down her cheeks and rolled down her skinny, blue-veined arms. Her shoulders shook as we gradually fell into stunned silence. It was the only time the library was quiet. The only sound in the library was Mrs. Felton sobbing.

Thirty kids watched her with the paralysis usually reserved for a good movie. We didn’t consider ourselves participants in this drama; we saw ourselves as kids and her as an adult. This was how the roles were to be played until the day Mrs. Felton changed the script and had a nervous breakdown.

Mrs. Felton never again stepped into that school. My days in a closet with an overhead projector ended, and I knew I was culpable in the death of her teaching career. I had run with the pack, and I had never said thank you. It was intoxicating to hang with the cool kids, and now I was one of the criminals.

No, kids aren’t cute.

Before they leave the school library, I announce, “Whoever wants to do private work should be here on Tuesday or Wednesday after school.”

“Me, me!” Stella cries.

“All right, Stella, I’ll see you here Tuesday.”

Marin signs up, along with Jennifer and Anna.

“Yeah, maybe I will,” Miles says.

“Forget it, Miles. Either yes or no. I won’t be stood up again.”

“Yeah, okay.” He leaves.

I have no idea what that means, and I don’t care. I really don’t care if I see any of them again.

They're meek as they depart. They gather backpacks and exit in silence.

"Bye, Ms. Ryane," Jennifer whispers.

"Uh-huh."

I collapse into a chair. I'm on the brink of a Mrs. Felton episode. How do real teachers do this every day? Our routine has become one good meeting followed by three terrible ones. I'm either in euphoria or despair. *Why am I so lousy at this?*

The group has divided into warring factions: Dana, Candace, and Jordan, the fifth graders. Jennifer and Marin, the fourth graders. Grace, Stella, Carla, and Regina, the third graders. Miles, the lone male, is a solitary soldier. Anna, snubbed by the others, hasn't aligned with anyone.

1. WE HELP EACH OTHER.
2. WE SHARE WITH EACH OTHER.
3. WE HONOR THE WORKS OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE.

They kneel in Child's Pose, breathe deep, and repeat vocal exercises, but I'm a complete nincompoop to imagine any of this resonates or means anything to them. Share with each other? These kids want to kill each other. And today, I wanted to kill all of them and then myself.

I shuffle out of the library, shifting the stupid damn-it-to-hell Shakespeare Club box from hip to hip. As I'm about to open the car trunk, I hear a voice.

"Ms. Ryane!"

Stella runs up, full of pep. I give her a nod. It's all I'm capable of. I wish I were driving away.

"Guess what? Listen! 'So will I grow, so live, so die!'" she shouts.

I nod and slam the trunk.

"See I learned it... I learned it by heart!" She sparkles.

I examine the car keys in my hands. "Stella, that's great. I know you can learn all of your lines. We'll work together next week, okay?"

"Okay!" She throws her arms around my legs, laughing.

Am I high? My head reels.

"There's my mom... see ya!" And she's gone.

"So will I grow, so live, so die," I whisper and burn rubber.

CHILDREN'S WRITES

Dear Diary,

Oberon wants to have my servant boy! I can't because I promised a human friend that died and I promised her I will take care of his son.

Titania.

LESSON PLAN

When “teachers” acting on a television show complete a tough scene, the director calls “Cut!” The “teacher” has her hair and makeup retouched and is offered a refreshing drink while the charming actors playing her “kids” compliment her talent.

William is working late, so I throw together a salad and plant myself in front of the TV to catch up on the news. Iraq is in freefall as three warring cultures whip up civil unrest. The Middle East is exploding in enmity. A hornet’s nest of hate.

Hate can’t be reasoned with. Hate is a hungry monster demanding nourishment. Intolerance of other human beings is something that is nurtured. The laying down of swords for peace is inconceivable by those filled with hate.

It can be exhilarating to seek power and revenge. Self-righteousness is a powerful drug. Hate is a quick high.

Compassion, empathy, and generosity may feel better, but they take effort.

Today, I was so angry at those kids. I couldn’t find my power and wanted revenge. I was slipping to the dark side. This cannot be; it quite simply cannot be. I have to get a grip.

I can’t get to the bottom of their grievances. I can’t sort out their cliques and revenge scenarios. All I can do, one Shakespearean line at a time, is keep them on course to a greater prize.

“Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more...”