

Throwaway Kids (thrō ə-wā' kīdz) *n.* The children and adolescents who have been thrown out of class, thrown out of school, thrown out of their home, thrown in jail, only to be thrown back on the streets.

THE THROWAWAY KIDS

By: Jonathan Masters

Q1: Is this a true story?

This story is fiction inspired by experience. The names have been changed to protect the guilty, but the emotions and impact remain intact.

Q2: Could the descriptions in the following pages be happening right now?

Most definitely.

Q3: Will things like this continue to happen?

Without a doubt. Broken young men are not being fixed within prison walls. Outside, they have no real opportunities.

Day 1

The sky is a blue so majestic, if it were the ocean, I would be able to see 30 feet to the bottom teaming with life. White cotton clouds stretch into the sea soft and inviting as a down pillow. How I wish to be lazily swinging in a hammock enjoying the glitter of the sun through the leaves.

The glistening silver of the razor wire atop a 15-foot chain link fence pulls me away from this bliss as I realize with acute fright I am about to walk into prison.

Two inches of reinforced steel door keep me on the freedom side of the facility. A young man in the control room walks to the bullet-proof Plexiglas and speaks through a sliding drawer, “you must be Mr. Masters. Sign in there,” he points to a shelf of three-ringed binders, “and I’ll buzz you in. Oh, and here’s a bag for your lunch. Only clear plastic.”

I awkwardly transfer my containers out of my brown grocery bag into the bag provided, sign in holding the now useless, illegal bag gingerly, and pull at the door which makes a clang-thud impeding my entry. Metal-on-metal, I hear the grinding gears of moving pieces. As I pass through to confinement, I see the one-inch wide by three-inch high latch in the door ensuring that those who pass are permitted to do so.

In the next chamber waits a uniformed guard sitting at a folding table talking to an older, robust gentleman with a white beard and a beige hat. “Hi Jon! I’m Mr. Santarini. I’ll be your escort for the day.” Turning to the guard, Santarini bids him farewell. “Bye, Jack. It was nice catching up.”

We progress through another impenetrable door and meet up with the guard who greeted me, still standing two feet higher than us, behind one inch of tempered glass. Santarini places a inch-and-a-half ovular, copper disc on a pull-out

drawer. “3-6-7, Mr. James!” James takes the disc and hangs it on one of three turnstiles full of keys. “Thank you!” With Santarini equipped, we head deeper into the labyrinth.

Santarini breaks the silence when we get outside. I’m too busy stealthily looking around every corner for shadows to notice a lull in the conversation. “When you get your chip (this must be the copper disc), you will give it to the guard up front, and they’ll give you your keys. Never, ever, ever take your keys home. They have to lock down the facility until they are found, and you’ll definitely get written up if that happens.”

We stroll down a sidewalk, between two dilapidated buildings “On your left is the powerhouse and on your right is property. Boy’s Home is the oldest juvenile facility in the state. It has been around for 110 years.” Santarini’s demurely turns into a docent. “Up until about 50 years ago, the facility was completely self-sufficient. There were no fences, and the boys farmed acres of land. That’s what they ate.” He points passed the powerhouse. “That building used to be the slaughterhouse, used to raise cows and chickens. The only supply truck in or out was a propane tanker about every four to five months. The boys worked the land and supplied themselves everything else.”

“That’s incredible!” I interject encouraged by the cooperative sufficiency of my new surroundings, “Do they still have programming like that?”

“Oh, God no!” Santarini guffaws at such an absurd question. “The clientele has changed. It used to be that parents could drop their kids off for up to three days if they felt like it. The boys were respectful and had discipline. Now, the boys just want to lie in their bunk and sleep 14 hours a day until they get released. It is an ordeal to get them to tidy their rooms and make their beds, and they only live in a six-by-nine. Plus, it is

a liability. The tools can be used to hurt others or themselves. The facility won't take the risk." He nods up to the left. "This is the school."

We've walked about a third of a mile. "Do you do this every day?" I ask.

"Have to," Santarini illuminates. "Not allowed to get rides because the vans have to be free for security purposes. You can only get a ride with a doctor's note. Without a note, you can get disciplined, and Mr. Hicks loves a good write up." Santarini gives a devilish smile as we proceed through the doors.

"Jon, can I call you Jon?" We're already fast friends. "This is the education office. Here are mailboxes. You'll get one, eventually. They are not exactly in alphabetical order, but close. Here is the copy room. You know that is Mike's office, and next to it is our secretary, Pamela's office."

We walk toward a door opposite our entrance. Santarini seems to enjoy his role as host, "Right here is our shared computer. If you want to check email or use the internet, this is where you go. You'll need a login which you probably won't get for at least a month. Things happen slow around here."

Having worked in under-resourced schools, even I'm a little dismayed by the "shared computer" statement and push for clarification. "Aren't there computers in our classrooms?"

"Not in all of them, and they are divvied out by tenure. So, I'm afraid you probably won't get one. But don't be jealous. The classroom computers are over 10 years old, have no internet, and no printers."

Santarini's glib explanation pushes me beyond disbelief. "You're saying we all have to share one computer with internet, email, and printer?"

"Yup." Santarini leaves space for this to settle as he exits the office.

"Over here is the teacher's lounge." The staleness of poor circulation combined with a plethora of exotic dishes from years past motivates me to take note of other possible dining locations as we proceed. "We eat lunch here and play cards. Do you know how to play bridge? We have been looking for a fourth. You can join us!" There is no invitation, and thus, no opportunity to decline. Plus, Santarini is old enough to be my grandfather, and I have fond memories of my parents waiting up for my grandparents to arrive from out of state at nine o'clock in the evening and staying up well past midnight playing pinochle. I guess I will see what all the fuss is about.

"This is our refrigerator and that one is for security supervisors. Do not use it because they get very upset." Santarini opens an avocado green door to reveal warped, stained shelves. Despite three containers of baking soda, a putridness hits me, and I can't help but wonder, *is the salad drawer full of water?*

Santarini answers my thought. "Yeah, the freezer leaks and runs down the back. We empty it once a week." I silently vow to eat peanut butter for the rest of my career. I cannot afford to have a side of mold with every meal 'til I retire (or die).

We pass what looks like the first microwave oven to ever come off the assembly line and one next to it that could be even older. They both have a rotary dial and doors that open top to bottom. One is divided in half by a metal shelf. "This is the men's room." Santarini uses his key to open an adjacent door.

“Good. I have to go.” It’s not an emergency, but I need a moment to process the decrepitude of my latest career choice. I enter to find rust-colored tiles and a privacy divider wall that has oxidized in an arching pattern for three inches away from every screw-joint. The browns continue to run from the floor up the side of the once blue wall, giving the impression that the tiles are contagious and have eaten up a solid foot. The wall sways from the breeze as I pass.

Of the four urinals, the one furthest right is missing the top valve and piping. It’s covered with an iron stopper but is steadily leaking onto a clear trash bag that is funneling the stream into the toilet. It is perplexing that it doesn’t overflow. As I finish, I realize due to the discoloration pattern on the trash bag that this has been the order of things for quite some time. It explains the acrid, humid atmosphere. I attempt to wash my hands in freezing water and pump an empty soap dispenser to no avail. I’m adopting the impression that this place is actively and methodically trying to shorten the staff’s life expectancy to reduce the pension obligation. It just might work.

Santarini leads me back through the office and up a set of stairs next to the school entrance. “When the youth enter and leave the building, they line up on those two lines by house, Side A and Side B. Then they follow this line up and go around to the classrooms in a clockwise motion. Before we had the lines, it was madness. Mobs of kids would block the halls twenty at a time. The line gives them structure and something to follow. It’s not perfect but it’s better.”

“This will be your room, 208.” He peers through the glass, cupping his face with both hands to improve his view of the darkness. “We can’t get in until Mike gets back.”

“Where is everyone?” I have just come to realize that this ghost town is uninhabited, which renews a foreboding sense of dread. I watch too many movies.

“They are all at a conference at State University. Something about brain disorders.” This factoid is not relieving my zombie apocalypse nightmare. “I wasn’t invited because I’m retiring. We can hang out in my classroom.”

“When are you retiring?” I probe longingly. For the amount of education we have, teaching is not a highly paid profession. Many find hope through the dark days by following the light of a promised pension.

“Well, I already retired from the city schools after 40 years there. I used to teach at Otis House. It was a school and residential for kids who were in trouble with the law, the last step before this place. When I first started here, I bumped into a lot of my previous students, and they made sure that no one hassled me here. I got a reputation coming from Otis,” Santarini pauses to puff out his chest and punctuate his street cred. “To answer your question, three more months makes eight years here, so I can collect a second pension.”

Santarini leans back in his chair and rests his hands on his paunch. “Right now it’s,” he squints at the wall clock, “8:25. Lunch is at 12:00. I’ve given you the tour. Is there anything you want to know? Any questions?”

“Mr. Santarini, to be frank, I taught my last day at my previous school yesterday. For the last five years, my classrooms have been lovingly called Masters’ Madhouse for the rough clientele I accept and attempt to improve. The only reason I even started today is because my original start date was mid-semester, and my previous school threatened to suspend my teaching license if I didn’t finish out the year. This was the farthest back I could push it to appease both parties. It has been an emotionally charged couple of months,

and I'm thankful for a break, however short." My body reflects my mentality as I slide to a lounging position and put my crossed feet on a student chair. "We can go over whatever you like, or I can thumb through textbooks and stay out of your hair."

Santarini shows me the attendance sheets and how he keeps grades. He points out specific students and tells war stories. "This kid, Arlovsky, is the Polish Prince. He is the hardest working student you'd be blessed to get. While Newman, he's a piece of work . . ." I'm perfectly content to glaze over and listen to the hum.

We play bridge at lunch where I meet Ms. Grimley, a rosy cheeked 50-something woman with a contagious smile, and Mr. Sharpe, a wiry old army vet who pictures himself a charmer and a hustler, neither of which seem fitting.

The afternoon brings a battery of show and tell in Santarini's room. It seems that every object fondled has a story behind it, and Mr. Santarini is delighted to regale me with each and every one.

"Oh my, how time flies. It's almost quitting time. We get the first 15 minutes of the day and the last 15 minutes as break time, and we use them to walk to and from the gate. We better get going."

The return walk to the front gate takes a leisurely ten minutes, and Mr. Santarini and I stand in the anti-chamber outside the fortified door waiting for the horn. Santarini busies himself small talking each passer-by, trying to convince me he is a royal. Santarini explains why our exit must be delayed, "We can't leave until four, Jon. Mike has spies everywhere." He shifts his gaze suspectingly. "He'll use any and every reason to put the vice on you."

I use the time to contemplate my recent move. But just as career remorse begins to set in, the warm sun of freedom washes away any doubts. It is the weekend, and I can use a break.

Day 2

As I leave the comforts of my car, an intense terror over my new situation takes hold of me. I left a moderately dysfunctional alternative program in a reasonably affluent suburban community with the possibility of tenure at the end of the year to spend the rest of my career in prison. I seriously need to reevaluate my decision making process.

I try to blend in with the masses as I work my way through the security clearance of the front gate. Employees don't go through a gate per se, but there is a vehicle port with double gates that elicits that freedom moment in movies of leaving a penitentiary. The newly released can't just walk through the front door. On the big screen, he has to leave through oversized, menacing gates that coldly close behind him provoking a reminiscent thought of the time inside while contrasting the ecstasy of being reunited with the outside world with the uncertainty of the future. There is always a jarring slam signifying that a piece of the free man was left inside leaving him forever changed.

Refocusing from the daydream, I find that I've walked out of the gatehouse without the foggiest idea of how to get to the school. The door clicks locked behind me; no turning back. I see a group walking a path between two ancient structures and decide to tag along. Maybe I will make a friend. If I get desperate, I'll ask for directions. Don't panic. Play it slow. Be cool.

I find recollective breadcrumbs that lead me to the school. Once between the double doors, I realize I don't have the keys needed for entry. No turning back now. I wait in the alcove, prepared for the jolt my presence is bound to deliver to any

dazed individual stumbling into work who wouldn't dream of somebody waiting in such a strange, tight spot.

I don't have to wait long. The school secretary lets me in. She is a woman of 140, and I'm afraid to introduce myself or take her hand because any slight touch may reduce this already withered sight to its final rubble. She looks way up from her hunch and scrunches her nose to appropriately place her glasses and assess this seemingly gargantuan man, "Well aren't you a tall drink of water. I'm Pam, the school secretary." Her voice is spotty at best.

I find a seat in the office, waiting for the principal to arrive. The secretary putters about her work worriedly muttering under her breath. When she discovers me again in the midst her fluttering, she obliges, "Mike will be here shortly," and continues her scuttle. Retreating to her desk, I note the barrage of sticky notes that accommodate for loss of memory. The office is sparse with clinically white walls, devoid of any mementos. It is a hazardous in this trade to display family portraits. The tremor elicited by criminal comments about loved ones can be hard to shake.

The heavens open at 8:10 AM, and the front office is deluged with teachers. Dialing the clock back tenish minutes for the walk, they must have arrived at the front gate en masse at eight. It is comforting to see that my new colleagues take their contracted work time seriously. I don't mind showing up a little early, but I pride myself on being the first one in the car when the whistle blows.

Mike Hicks, our leader, enters winded and overwhelmed. He sees me, and a confused look gives way to comprehension. He nods towards his office in a silent form of direction, and I follow him.

“Jon, are we glad you’re here,” Mike beams from ear-to-ear. This has to be the warmest welcome I’ve ever received at the start of a new job. “It seems like we’ve been talking about your arrival for months. Were you here Friday?”

“Yes, Mr. Santarini gave me the tour,” I answer respectfully while standing stoically in doorway waiting for an invitation to sit. The new educator / principal dynamic makes me uneasy. Wanting to make a good impression, I overplay my subordination.

“We were at a two-day lecture,” Mike offers, “hosted by State University, about the effects of traumatic brain injury on learning and development.”

“Do you see a lot of that here?” I feign interest to make an investment in this new relationship.

“No, not really, it was some very interesting stuff. We had grant money that we had to spend, and this conference fit the bill. So . . .” Mike takes a second to let it all wash over him. It’s obvious by appearance he is winded easily. Calling him rotund would entail that he is a large man. Standing at just a hair over five feet with chubby stumps for fingers and a perpetual flush, Mike reminds me of an obese oompa loompa. “Jon, I’m going to have you observing some of our teachers today. I want you to spend first period with Mrs. Stecker, our history teacher, and second period with Mr. Sawyer, our language arts teacher.”

“Do you know when you want me to start teaching?” A lump rises over the uncertainty that awaits me. The first day in a new classroom feels like dry heaving butterflies. It is where the over inflated self-view, confidence in idyllic principles, and pure sereness of a new opportunity get run over by the bulldozer of disturbed students trying to push every limit under the sun and smear their hang-ups and baggage all over my once

blanc canvass. I know, this being my fourth school, if I can cope with the presented reality, I will be successful.

“We’ll start you slow. The quarter ends at the end of the month, and then we have summer break. It would be easiest to slot you in at the new quarter. This morning I would like you to shadow Mr. Sawyer and Mrs. Stecker. That will give you a picture of how a classroom should run.”

Four weeks to observe, wander, and ready my classroom! This might not be the worst decision I ever made.

Mike leads me upstairs to the first classroom on the left. I can tell he is relieved to be rid of me. The gears are grinding on the day’s checklist, and Mike seems all business. “Mrs. Stecker, this is Mr. Masters. He will be shadowing you first hour and then you can direct him to Mr. Sawyer’s classroom for second.” Mike puts his head down and leaves in a huff without exchanging any pleasantries.

“You can sit over there.” Mrs. Stecker made brief eye-contact when the boss was in the room but now seems content staring at the computer screen while blindly pointing to an area behind her.

I find a chair a comfortable distance away from Mrs. Stecker, the kids’ desks, and the wall (don’t want to get cornered).

Students begin to seep in at 8:35. Were this my first rodeo, I would have a notebook and do some charting to look studious. After three other behavioral schools, I realize this gesture seems out of touch, and it is best to play confidently aloof and mysterious.

Mrs. Stecker greets the boys much the same as she welcomed me. “Grab a book, grab your folder, do your work.”

The walking dead mechanically do as they are told and file into desks. This process is repeated two more times as

different housing units matriculate. With each new arrival, more life is breathed into the atmosphere. Apparently, the boys have some catching up to do following a four day sabbatical. By the time the last unit is in, there is a frenzy of cautious chatter. It appears each youth is talking, keeping watch of Mrs. Stecker, and pretending to work all at the same time.

About ten minutes into the festivities, an average sized, stoic, Hispanic young man hauls off and punches the rather chatty, large, round-faced Hispanic in front of him, "Shut the fuck up!"

The big one sneers instigatingly, "You're just pissed cause you're a tard, stuck in eighth grade." He turns to the class. "This dude is 16 and still in eighth grade. How fucking dumb are you?" To his credit, the smaller one doesn't respond. Biggie's provocative face slithers closer, pushing for the desired effect. When none comes, Biggie takes his bulbous fist and slowly, delicately pushes the smaller kid's chin swiftly to one side. This elicits a response. With a potent thud, the smaller lands a retaliatory blow to the chest. "I'll fucking brain you," Biggie launches out of his seat with a book raised in both hands to hover over the little one who is leaning back, relaxed with a chiding chuckle.

Mrs. Stecker finally breaks her trance to observe the fireworks. Waiting. Waiting. "You gonna do it? Didn't think so. Get the hell out," Stecker barks. Biggie exits slumped, ashamed, defeated.

It is only moments before his return. Nothing is said as Biggie returns to his seat. Opening his folder, Biggie pulls his desk next to another student and proceeds to copy the entire assignment unashamed and unaddressed.

The periods last 90 minutes, and with the assignment lasting less than half, the boys busy themselves playing cards

that appear from someone's sock and reading magazines they attain by trading their ID to Mrs. Stecker.

The bartering once again brings Mrs. Stecker away from her portal. Aware that she has neglected me for over half-an-hour, Stecker gruffly initiates a dialogue, "Mike talks like you're the second coming. Why should I be impressed?" Mrs. Stecker is terrifying in that I'm-old-enough-to-be-your-mother and I'll-beat-you-with-a-spoon-if-you-give-me-lip kinda way. She appears to be middle to late 40's and has jet black Grecian/Italian hair. She is heavy but carries it in a way that shows she was once a beauty queen pursued by endless suitors.

"Well, um," I'm not sure how to humbly, yet confidently, field this question. "I came from a couple of alternative environments. I have experience with physical and behavior management, including two years at a mental hospital," I trail off perceiving that juggling flaming torches wouldn't impress this woman at the moment.

"Humph, you might last," she retorts, sizing me up. "What made you come to this shit-hole?"

"I chose to come." This comment intrigues her. "I was offered a contract for next year from my previous school, which would have been my last untenured year, but I could see that the program was beginning to fail. We went from 22 staff down to 17, and I was laid off and called back twice in the process. I was the only male in a 'hands-on' program, and one of only three people under the age of 50. The school was beyond our control. I knew I'd get hurt or be at risk of losing my job at some point. I came here because I've been in three different alternative environments, and funding wreaks havoc on staffing and programming. This is the only place I foresee as being open and somewhat stable for the rest of my career."

Mrs. Stecker just stares, bewildered. She does not know how to catalogue me. I have years, but I'm not jaded. I had an

opportunity for security, and I chose chaos. I'm an anomaly to her. She appears slightly distressed by me. Her only response is a sneer and sarcastic,

"Well, welcome to prison."

Mr. Sawyer is a refreshing change of pace. He is in his mid-thirties, roughly eight years my senior, and a ball of energy. His blond and red highlighted, mussed hair, trendy button down, and feux-moccasins emulate the free spirit he presents. I hope we become fast friends.

He seems unfazed by the bedlam of class change, inaudibly directing students to their supplies and stations, while giving me his full attention. "Hey! Masters, right? You can have my chair." He shuffles some papers on a precariously mountainous desk and paints on a smile to address the kids, "Open your books to 136!"

The desks are arranged in a circle, group discussion style, with a table and chair in the middle. Sawyer keeps the chair tucked and chooses to swivel to engage students whilst perched on the edge of the table. It tips as he animatedly makes a point, but he owns it, reddened, and proceeds with gusto. Sawyer has a passion for the literature he teaches, and I hope to be the special ed. counterpart to bring stories to life in this facility.

My eyes wander jealously along three bookshelves filled with class sets of great novels. I'm driven to teach these works because one, most of these kids have never completed a book and to be a part of that milestone is historic. The sparkle of the eye that accompanies this accomplishment is priceless. And two, these stories are the only things they will remember when they get out of school. To them, math is meaningless, science makes no sense, and history is a horrible bore. The nobility of crafted characters creates a sense in each of us, even if fleeting, that we too can rise to heroics. These kids need to experience

that goodness does exist. The sad thing is that due to their circumstances and baggage, it can only be found, for them, in fiction.

Sawyer interactively and vigorously lectures for a little over 40 minutes. All 12 young men sit attentively and participate reluctantly. Some seem genuinely interested and driven. Most of the youth are able carry the conversation, but Sawyer is conscientious to loft a softball to the less attuned. Each, save one, participates in the discussion. The exception sits sideways, hunched over reading material, refusing to make eye contact. Sawyer leaves the students with an assignment to address me.

"You have an impressive library." I choose to open with a compliment. I think it makes me likeable from the start.

"Thanks. I wish I had more of an opportunity to teach some of them." He is slightly winded with reddened cheeks from the instructive performance. He's slender, though not defined, with full cheeks. Which leads me to believe, this may be his exercise for the day.

"How often do you teach novels?" I'm curiously hopeful.

"As often as I can," he beams at revealing a source of pride. "The reading level here is low, even in regular ed. And, the facility has been in flux due to remodeling the houses. We are at about half of our normal population. It makes it hard to get traction with longer works."

"Have you taught all of these?" I ask of the over twenty different class sets.

"Most of them. Some are full sets I grabbed from a second-hand teacher store. The price was right, free," Casey chortles.

"How long have you been here?" I inquire in an attempt to gauge the period it took to become this established.

“This is my third year here. I bounced around districts on the outside for ten years,” Mr. Sawyer shares with air of machismo. He has been around the block and expects his experience to be respected.

I decide to stroke his pride. “What is the best piece of advice you can share for a new person?”

“Be very careful who you trust.” He lowers his voice and head to keep the conversation between us. “I won’t say any more than that. I think you should come to your own conclusions about people. Just be very aware. The staff are not always as they appear. Everyone here is out for number one, and often, they can be mean and catty to anyone who doesn’t see things their way.”

“*Jefferson House: dismiss outside.*” The loudspeaker relieves the slightly ominous tension.

As the boys are leaving, I get the chilling feeling that Sawyer is not to be trifled with just as much as Mrs. Stecker. He seems content and kind but carries himself with a bravado that hints he does not like being opposed. “Thanks for letting me visit, and thanks for the tip.”

“No problem.” Casey leaves me with a smile and warm handshake. “You’ll do just fine here. Just be a little guarded upfront. It’s for your own good.”

Day 7

The week starts with the faint hope of being assigned a classroom and subject matter so I can begin the hunt for curriculum. I appreciate getting to know my colleagues, but after six years of teaching, observing other teachers is like watching golf on a Saturday afternoon, a snooze fest.

Mike greets me with the dismal burden of a veteran on leave. “Walk with me, Jon.” Mike puts his bag in his office, and we head upstairs. “I want you to fill in for Mr. Tuck teaching math. He will be at Janesville, the girls’ facility, for another three weeks to straighten out IEP paperwork, and I need our special ed. boys to get some math credit.” Mike opens a classroom door. “Here are Tuck’s folders for each class. Here is a copy of the class lists by period. I’ll give you the morning to get yourself acclimated, and then, you teach this afternoon.” Mike exits in a whirlwind not bothering to verify that I heard a word.

Inhaling a deep, calming breath, I survey the classroom. Numbers, fractions, and decimals posters with various formulas are scattered about the walls with no apparent pattern. There are several posters of “Famous Black People throughout History.” Each poster has a different theme: civil rights, arts and music, movies and theatre, science and technology, and sports.

My eyes rest on the stack of folders Mike has left in my hands. Each and every folder is riddled with graffiti, mostly gang tagging. If I am going to have any hope of maintaining order, I have to give these kids new folders for new beginnings.

Making my way back to the office, I find an adjoining closet filled with supplies. I grab pencils, notepads, and

folders. As I retreat back to my assignment, Mike startles me. “What’s all that for?”

“Mr. Tuck’s folders are pretty beat up and tagged. I figured I would give the kids a fresh start.”

Mike clasps his hands and leans forward as if to instill a lesson on a child. “Well, we need to conserve resources. We don’t get to order a lot, and we need to conserve what we have.”

I attempt to assert myself. “I understand that, and I will keep it in mind. I just think it sends the wrong message that gang graffiti is okay. If I give them new folders, I can enforce the expectations.”

“I fully understand and support what you are saying,” Mike blows me off. “You will only be in that class for two weeks. Try to make the folders work, and we’ll get you new folders when you open your class.”

It is probably in my best interest to concede. “Alright,” I say misgivingly. I can tell this is going to be a sticking point. I’ve made my case. Best to keep the boss happy.

I head back to peruse the resources at my disposal. Tuck has two bookshelves full of seven different types of textbooks and over ten different workbooks. I pick through some of the folders in search for clues as to how this absent teacher ran his class. It seems that each student is at a different point in an indeterminable book. I could ask the fine young gents where they believe they were when Mr. Tuck was reassigned six weeks ago and hope for a thoughtful response. Discretion tells me this could lead to confusion, and it is probably best not to throw chum in the water on the first day.

As I sit cross-legged on the floor casually assessing some workbooks, the hustle and bustle of entry can be heard in the halls. Intermittent, “Quiet! On the line! Hold the noise! Stop at the corner!” is discernable over the din of clipped conversation.

I settle on a workbook that covers whole-number basic facts. I figure I can sustain doing a refresher for a couple of weeks. It won’t be too challenging, and the repetitive nature builds confidence and promotes focus, which will help me build rapport and avoid problems. The selling point is the pretest at the beginning of the book, which will easily and appropriately level the kids quickly.

I take one workbook to the copy room and make 20 copies of the pretest. It should be easy enough to hand out and explain, and as each kid hits a wall, I can make-up an assignment out of the workbook to alleviate their struggles. Fool proof.

As I saunter away from the copier confident I have a solid plan, I see Mike head for the restroom. Now’s my chance. I run back into the supply room to find my previous pile of provisions waiting. I hold them close to my chest with my back to the bathroom as I exit the office and scurry up the stairs.

“Teachers, the youth are in the building.” The loudspeaker’s crackle prepares the second floor to receive their students. Perched in my classroom doorway, I gaze to the left to observe kids briefly appear from the staircase before they disappear down the hallway, following the tape lines to the first corner. There is relative quiet, and the young men look disciplined with their hands behind their backs. I’m one of the last classes the boys will come to, so I listen to the jostle to anticipate the final turn.

“You’re not fuckin Tuck?!” I am greeted by my first student.

“Mr. Masters,” I extend my hand. He shakes it. “Nice to meet you . . ?”

“Davion Pierce,” he straightens his posture and pushes his chest to enforce the importance of such a name.

“Mr. Pierce, have a seat,” I instruct, “and we’ll get started when the other students arrive.”

Four more young men filter into my room, none as pronounced as Davion. “Mr. Tuck has been gone for a while, so I won’t make you figure out where he left off. Instead, we are going to work on ‘Skillz Drillz.’” I’ve transcribed my catchphrase on the board to give more gusto to the filler lessons. “This is a pre-test to let me see what you know, so we can skip it, and what you don’t, so we can work on it.”

An inquiry comes from a young man with tattooed tears on one cheek, “Where are the calculators?”

“I don’t teach with calculators,” I explain, “because they don’t stretch your mind.”

“Well I’m not doing this shit.” The young man symbolically pushes himself backwards in the desk affixed to his chair and proceeds to cross his arm to nonverbally emphasize the seriousness of his statement.

“Suit yourself,” I try not to be confrontational. Puffing out my chest against a kid always turns me into the loser. It’s better to sidestep, “But, then you won’t earn any credit.”

“I don’t give a SHIT!” The overemphasis of the last word indicates he’s daring me to come at him again.

We have hit a fork the first five minutes of day one. If I send this kid out, I give the impression that I can’t handle my class. In previous schools, I’ve experienced that ‘tis better for everyone if students stay in their seats in their class. Whilst in the classroom, students create less hassles, less complaining, and fewer questions/attentions from the powers that be. I continue cautiously, intent on not erupting a student minutes into my first class. “I get that this transition may be frustrating for you, and school might not be your thing. I will make you a

deal: if you sit there without bothering anyone, I won’t bother you.”

No response. The strong glare Tear Drops was using to assert his dominance has shifted downwards in an attempt to hide the shame of unneeded over-aggression.

“If you feel like doing work, I’m just going to leave this worksheet here,” I place it on his desk and quickly move away before any objection can be levied.

Five minutes pass nervously. I keep close tabs on the objector’s hostility without him catching me leering. Abruptly, “I need a fucking pencil!” breaks the tension. Weepy wants to be educated after all.

I am working with another student and do not want to rekindle a spat over semantics. “They’re on my desk. Help yourself.” Precariously, the boy saunters to the desk, analyzes and sizes several options, finds the worthy tool, and proceeds to his seat to work unassisted for the remainder of the period.

“Great work, gentlemen!” I end the period with a compliment to emphasize the importance of their participation. “Please turn in your materials (I’ve been gifted a wood block with twenty holes to ensure all weapons, I mean, pencils are accounted for). You have a little over five minutes for a break before the bell.”

As Teary turns in his assignment, I try to bridge the gap. “I appreciate you finding the motivation to work. I know sudden changes are tough, and you made a good choice.”

He grunts, glares, and returns to his seat.

The boys are propelled by the bell. I hurriedly wish them well as they make a speedy retreat. “Have a great day! Quiet on the way to the next class!” Thus concludes my first period teaching in prison.

Day 10

As I finish my hurried lap through the education office to check my mailbox, I nearly bulldoze Mr. Sawyer who opposes my exit. “Good morning, Mr. Sawyer.” I plaster a smile.

“You can call me Casey. And, by the way,” I stop my progress to give him my full attention, “Mike wants you to join us for the SBS meeting this morning. It will start in the library at 8:15.”

It’s 8:12, “Aren’t the kids coming?”

“Security delays them 15 minutes. At least, we hope.” Casey shows me his fingers crossed and continues into the office.

What is SBS?

“SBS, or Strategic Behavior Systems, was adopted by Boys Home seven years ago. It is primarily run by the education department in an effort to differentiate between youth and adult offenders.” Casey has taken the reigns of this round table meeting after informal introductions. I smile and nod at new faces of counselors and therapists, immediately forgetting their names (I really should write them down) and give a brief, singsong introduction that spells out I’m new to the institution but not to the social/emotional population.

“The idea is simple to explain but can be harder to execute.” Casey becomes condescending and even dictatorial over the latter. “If we praise the good and try to minimize our attentions to the negative, the kids will change their behavior to obtain more attention from us.” Casey’s wide-eyed energy veils the contempt of repeating this song and dance.

I try to spare him the full address. “Yeah, my last school used the Father Finnegan method. He said all boys were essentially good and just need encouragement, a verbal hug. Finnegan pushed a three-compliments-to-one-correction model.”

“Essentially.” Casey continues, “SBS revolves around catching the students in an action we want repeated and reinforcing it. We do that with school store points each period and ‘Terrific Tokens.’” He hands me a circular, golden sheet about two inches wide. “When the students do something commendable that we want noticed and repeated, these are used. Kids write down their name and house, and on Fridays, they have a chance to be picked for a treat. Donuts, bagels, candy—mostly anything we can get donated.”

“First on the agenda,” Casey broadens his focus to include the rest of the group and directs to the itinerary we received upon entry, “I will turn it over to Ms. Wells. She is our ‘dean.’” Casey emphasizes the familiar title with air-quotes. “It’s unofficial, but she handles our TOTs, time out tickets.”

Mrs. Wells merrily takes the baton like a fairy godmother while handing out a spreadsheet that details the “TOT Top 10.” Wells offers an explanation to compliment her annotations, “With our quarter ending on Friday, Smith, Jackson, and McAllister have earned five or more TOTs and have received ten days extended sentence. Jackson, a frequent flyer, has gotten two extensions.” She pauses, offering eye-contact to any who welcome it. “Encourage these youth to avoid TOTs for ten days straight to earn their time back. The rest have two to four TOTs, so push them to squeak through the next two days, or they could get more time.”

Wells wispily offers the lead back to a focused Mr. Sawyer. Ms. Brown uses the transition to slide me an open folder with a tri-sectioned, upside-down trapezoid on it. “The SBS system is

modeled on three types of students. Green are the students who are able to function within normal programming: teaching, expectations, and verbal redirection. Eighty percent of our youth fall into this category. The yellow are students who have received one to three TOTs. They need more intense interventions and may need to be removed from class to talk to youth correction officers, Ms. Wells, or Mr. Hicks. We hope this line of intervention works, and they can return to green the next quarter. The red, as Ms. Wells put it, are our frequent flyers. They consist of our five to ten percent who are the most disruptive, aggressive, and defiant. They've exhausted all of the previous options and need a heavier hand like extended time or to be sent to Truman House, our solitary confinement."

Brown's eyes penetratingly never leave mine until she has concluded. She leans back to shift her attention back to Casey, who takes the ball. "Thank you, Lashonda. With the quarter ending, do we have any more kids with 50, 100, or 150 days TOT free?"

Unaware she has been asked a question, Wells offers, "I can check."

"Lashonda, can you follow up and print certificates?"
Casey directs the meeting like an executive.

A nod and snarky, "uh huh," accompanies Ms. Browns lopsided smirk.