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25 Students of Comp101 on the Wall, 25 Students of Comp, Take One Down, Pass ‘Em Round

Introduction

As bell hooks explains, “beloved community” is founded on acknowledging and respecting our identity-related differences.¹ I am an MFA student concentrating in fiction writing and a Teaching Assistant (TA) in the English Composition Department at Rutgers-Camden. My position as a TA allows me to facilitate a beloved community with a new, diverse group of students each semester. The following short story is an allegory for this unique opportunity.

In reality, my classroom’s beloved community happens in an assigned setting (Armitage 205) and 23 students are assigned to my section of COMP101. The setting of *25 Students of Comp101 on the Wall, 25 Students of Comp, Take One Down, Pass ‘Em Round* is intentionally more personal to me because, especially towards the end of each semester, the kind of equitable, willful community we have established feels more special than a generic cinder block classroom. The premise for *25 Students of Comp101...’s* characters aligns with reality (and society at large); we each come into the space with a unique identity, background, interests, and skills. Rather than producing social fissures, acknowledging our dissimilarities strengthens our communities ability to be a beloved community, that is a moral community.² Developing a community founded on equity requires recognition and discussion of systemic injustice and inequity. In particular, both *25 Students of Comp101...’s* and my classroom explore the following questions:

- Who has the power and why? Systems imposed and upheld by those who benefit from the system.
- What are the ways in which exploited populations have limited options and choice, especially in ways overlooked by the elite?
- How can acknowledging the power of space and/or the circumstances presented by our environment facilitate systemic change?

¹ Hooks, Bell. *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*. Henry Holt and Company, 2006.

² Ibid.

25 Students of Comp101 on the Wall, 25 Students of Comp, Take One Down, Pass ‘Em Round

My students appear in my apartment. All 25 of them: V, T, A, M—all of them. They arrive at 1:15pm. Most in backpacks and the same clothes I’d seen them in this morning.

Well, I am back in my joggers, OK. I can admit it. Because on Tuesdays I don’t teach in the afternoon or have any class of my own. Also a heather gray athletic top, though I don’t plan on working out. Crocs too, to prove some kind of point that I can only make in private.

I say “my students,” which is confusing. It’s confusing for all of us. Because I’m not their teacher, nor their professor, and they never call me by my first name, even though I’ve told them over and over that’s my preference.

Anyway, I’m perched on the left edge of my new tweed couch. I’m facing a musty pile of student papers I can’t quite bring myself to grade. It’s 1:14 PM. Right hand is holding a turkey and tomato sandwich.

And I’m thinking, I guess it would be correct to say I am their instructor. I am their TA. I teach Comp 101, and typically, when my students raise their hand, they don’t use any name at all, so what does it matter?

Left hand: I don’t know, but I was alone when I was holding whatever it was until I was neither alone nor holding anything.

Whose sneaker is crushing my foot? Is that? R? Ah, yes, R. R’s white and red chunky sneaker. My turkey sandwich on top now. He is smiling, as if he’s just received a compliment, but only for a moment. Then he looks around like an owl. I say, “Ow,” to free my foot and he looks down and meets my eyes but doesn’t show any sign of recognition, then looks down to the

messy lunch I've dropped, then back to my face, this time with the bashful, forgiving eyes that only a student can give their TA.

Head swivels and I realize: it's not just R. It's the whole class. About half in the living room, the other half split between the dining room and kitchen. Because my apartment is small, maybe 800 sqft, it's crowded.

The shock consumes us all at first. No one remembers to ask questions. The five students who appear nearest the dining table take a seat, plopping their sacks beside them. I've not cleared my dishes the last couple lunches, OK. That's just how I roll sometimes. Februarys are difficult. So a plate sprinkled with crumbs or slimed in some shiny condiment sits in front of each student and it looks almost as if they've just finished an awkward meal together.

After a minute or two of stillness, a couple students pace to my front door. M rattles the handle. The door doesn't move.

"You've got to turn both locks so they're vertical," I tell him.

M does as I've instructed. Tries again. Nothing. He looks over at me. They all look at me, actually, maybe out of habit. I wonder if I should be embarrassed.

"Let me try," I say, stepping in front of him.

The doorknob twists easily in my hand.

The door to my apartment doesn't lead outside, but to a long carpeted hallway lined with hollow doors to identical apartments. My hollow door is normal-sized but I open it as wide as I can, so all my students can see there's nothing to worry about.

Great, issue resolved.

But then M tries to walk out of my open door. That's when the problems start. The toe of his right sandal barely crosses the threshold when what looks like a sparsely woven blanket made

of sinewy threads of light appears in his way. Like a trampoline that sends his foot right back inside.

“What the fuck. Let me try,” I say, stepping in front of him again.

I go through. I step both of my bare feet onto the apartment hallway’s gray, low-pile carpet. Nothing weird. Just uncomfortable fluorescents overhead. I slap my hands against both of my sides, staring at M pointedly. Never did I ever think I would have to articulate the inappropriateness of gaslighting your TA, let alone inside home.

But then A, my favorite student, who I could never pull a fast one on me, moves M to the side. She leans forward and the membrane glitters back to life, slingshotting A back into the entryway. She lands on her elbows with a bright thud. She looks more dazed than injured.

The rest of the afternoon is lost to this: students standing in line, and over and over again—even though it eventually becomes clear that their effort is senseless—alternate between testing the limits of their cage. They grow loud in their fear and then quiet. By the time it’s dark, the collective mood has transformed entirely from desperation to surrender. Clearly, no one can hear their yells, receive their calls. The apartment is cocooned in invisible armor— nothing in, nothing out.

I sit and stare, OK:

- Because it feels like I’m responsible for them, especially while here. Like I should stay.
- Because of some inane fear. Something having to do with the world not acting like it should.
- But mostly because of a present, realistic fear: what if they would never be able to leave? What if my apartment was permanently infested with 25 New Jersey-ites? What if there was nothing to be done about it?

The students must notice my incapacities. N tells me in a whisper, while leaning close into my face, that there isn't any food left. They make a grocery list, collect Venmo contributions. N comes back to my side. I hear my Venmo app ding. N leans close again and reminds me that I'm the only one who can leave. She pushes the list into my hands and says, "Please, please, teacher. You have to go now."

Somehow, I manage. I buy the list. When I return, my students tell me they attracted the attention of a couple who live down the hall who told them their situation was fucked. They tell me we can try again tomorrow.

I don't own enough bowls, so some students spoon their chili out of glass cups. It's been a long day, OK, it's more bean water than anything else but my students take pity on me. Students are everywhere—two on each dining chair, around the edge of my large jute rug, on every inch of the couch—the din of polite chatter fills my apartment. I can't help feeling grateful for the company. The chaos is easier to ignore over candlelight and the sound of chewing.

I wake when the sun is just a white toenail in the sky. It feels as if I've awoken from a stupor. A couple lucky students sleep curled on the couch, one has rigged a cot-like structure out of dining chairs, but mostly they line the floor, unable to get further from each other than a foot or two. I'm careful to avoid waking anyone, wrapping my robe tighter as I noiselessly tiptoe out the door.

By the time I convince my building manager that this issue is pressing enough to require his personal, immediate attention (manic screaming was ultimately the cost, OK), L is standing in the hallway. Who would ever think that an 18 year old standing in a hallway could well up enough excitement to scream?

“You got out!” I hold his shoulders.

“Just me though.”

“You all can’t—” I start, turning towards the crowd in the threshold. Their faces are creased with sleep.

“No,” many say. A few try and push their hands through the threshold. The skin glitters, rebounds their hands with surprising force.

I expect at least a wink of shock from the building manager, but he just looks despondent. He indicates towards my apartment with his hand, “This is outside my scope. I don’t know what you did to your apartment but you’re gonna need to fix it. Nothing I can do. And I guess nothing you can do either,” he smiles and turns on his heel, “but be a big ‘ole happy family!”

L tells me that he was able to get reception outside of the building, that he called his family but received the same dejection from everyone he talked to.

“I guess it’s just us,” L says, following me back into my apartment and shutting the door.

By Day Six, we’ve established a ritual. As soon as the sun breaks the horizon, the students line up at the door to try their escape. To be honest, and I wouldn’t actually say this to anyone, but it makes me sad every time one leaves. Even if they come back, it’s not quite the same.

The signs of physical degradation caused by, now, 19 privacy-less, panicked teenagers living in her apartment take over—not just clutter, but *dirt*: used dishes cemented into a tower casts its own shadow, the powerful sour smell of sweat becomes unavoidable, a permanent grime and grit blankets the floors and surfaces. Everyone is less nice about my horrible cooking.

Ironically, the released students return often; they contribute to the collective food budget and complain about the lack of taste alongside their trapped peers. My apartment stays crowded.

Y is released today. He lets out a loud “Woop!” when his hand goes cleanly through the threshold. Y runs back into the apartment, grabs his stuff, and runs out yelling, “My own bed! Later, suckers!”

Something about his tone spoils the mood of the room. We eat our breakfast in silence. Morning light pours through the front windows.

“It’s not that bad here.” I say, more defensively than I mean to.

“Yeah,” A confirms quickly, smiling through her scrambled eggs, “it’s not bad here, teach.” Thank god for A.

A laugh like a bark cuts the air. We sit in silence for a beat before K says, “Yeah, of course it isn’t bad for *you*.”

“She’s doing her best, K.”

“It’s not about her best,” K says, rising to her feet. “It’s about choice.”

“What the fuck do you mean, choice?” G joins in.

“Choice, she can’t give you every choice you want.” A says and I realize they’re talking about me. “You have every choice she can give you, given the circumstances. Just don’t do what you don’t want to do.”

“That’s not real choice, A, and you know it.” K lowers her voice because at this point, every satellite conversation has dissolved to focus on this one. “I don’t choose to eat whatever she cooks. I don’t choose to sleep on the floor. I don’t *choose* to be here. And there is literally no reason *why it’s me*.”

“You’re right,” A says, an ember I don’t recognize blazes in her eyes. “I guess there’s no reason any of us who can leave should be sticking around this dump.”

My brows knit together. A’s cruelty is out of character.

K falters too, confronted with the threat of real isolation. She looks around at the growing mess, the decay of the apartment. Her fists grip her knees until her knuckles are white but her eyes flatten to their normal shade of brown. “This place is fucking shit, yeah. But there’s no reason you get the choice, A. The choice to leave.” She smiles a close-lipped smile.

For a few days, I think that’s the end of it. The students who can leave return when they can, and those who can’t, resent it. Even my own clothes smell like this vile apartment. Years later, I will try and remember this smell and fail.

But on Day Ten, I wake up to no smell. The apartment is, well, my apartment. My walls un-gritted, carpets vacuumed, new-ish tweed couch absent of clutter. The stack of ungraded papers has been neatly returned to the coffee table.