

## Squeaky

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I skip the crowded teachers' lot and park my truck on the asphalt outside my classroom, taking a quick glance at my reflection in the rearview mirror before heading inside. I spent this past summer growing out my facial hair so the kids wouldn't notice that the lines on my face are starting to deepen. Middle schoolers will take any whiff of weakness and use it against you in more ways than you could ever imagine.

"Welcome to the sixth grade," I say to the class, making sure to keep the tone casual and the enthusiasm to a minimum. "You can call me Mr. H." They've already been waiting for fifteen minutes when I arrive partway through the homeroom period that exists solely for the purpose of taking attendance. Why get to school twenty minutes early for something you can do in five? This is what I tell my new students, who laugh nervously. Eventually they'll get used to my relaxed humor, and realize I'm not some stuffy old-maid librarian type, like the teachers they've gotten used to in elementary school.

Even though I'm getting older, I'm still one of the more popular teachers in the school. What most teachers don't get is that kids this age don't want you to put in too much effort. They don't like to see you sweat. They find it stressful,

and ultimately it fills them with disdain. The less you care about your students the better. I don't spend hours decorating the classroom and making "fun" worksheets with answers that form jokes and riddles. Leave that to Mr. Fancy Nancy in the room next door, who teaches literature and ancient civilizations, subjects he chose because he truly adores the Greeks and finds reading to be "intellectually and emotionally fulfilling." That's fine for Mr. Nancy, but it's not what the kids respond to, trust me. I meet my students with humorous indifference, and those disgusting, prepubescent little nerds thrive in my messy, undecorated classroom.

Together, Mr. Nancy and I have been teaching the school's single class of "highly gifted" sixth graders all of their academic subjects for the past twelve years. It's the best job in the school. No fights or rowdiness in my classroom, not with these nerds. The students in my morning classes had to score in the ninety-ninth percentile on second- and third-grade standardized tests, be recommended for highly gifted consideration by their fourth-grade teachers, and then get a score of 145 or above on the IQ test that teacher recommendation gave them access to, all for the privilege of being in my A-block earth science and B-block pre-algebra classes. I try to make it worth their while.

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During science I pass out textbooks and planners and teach the students how to set up their binders. In math class, we really get into things. We talk about PEMDAS, and they all know the Please Excuse My Dear Aunt Sally version, but I teach them Please Excuse My Dope Ass Swag, which none of them have heard before. They start to realize my coolness, and even the most straitlaced girls, the ones with perfect handwriting and high ponytails, start to relax, laughing at my jokes. Everyone is having a good time until, after an especially funny punchline, a scrawny girl in the front row shoots her arm into the air. I ignore her, but she talks anyway, in a high-pitched, nasally, migraine-inducing squeak of a voice. "I find that joke offensive," she declares.

I take a good look at her. It was an innocuous blonde joke, and this girl clearly has brown hair, although it's light enough that she could be one of those brunettes who insists she's a blonde. "Do you need to go down the hall to the bathroom and take a look in the mirror?" I ask, drawing more laughter from the class. "You're not blonde."

“You don’t have to be blonde to find a blonde joke offensive,” she squeaks back. I can feel the rest of the group rolling their eyes.

I turn to a tiny girl in the front row, the blondest of the high ponytails. “Did you find the joke offensive?” I ask her gently. She smiles at me and shakes her head, her blonde ponytail swishing back and forth as she does.

I turn back to the squeaky girl. “There, see?” She refuses to give up, opening her mouth to argue more, but I turn away and continue with the lesson before she can interrupt again. I’ve had students like these before, and I’ve learned how to deal with them.

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When the kids go out to lunch, I crack open a Diet Coke and watch YouTube videos on one of the two classroom computers. Mr. Nancy knocks timidly on my open classroom door before shuffling into the room. “So, how’s the new group?” he asks, lingering by the door. Mr. Nancy is constantly nervous and a real nuisance to be around.

I shrug my shoulders and keep my eyes on the computer screen, not bothering to pause the video. Mr. Nancy is always doing this, trying to get me to give away information that will give him a leg up, and make him seem like a better teacher than me.

“Anything I should watch out for?” he asks. I shrug again, and he just stands there, watching me with a concerned expression, shifting his weight back and forth between his feet.

“There’s one girl that’s gonna be a problem,” I say, finally, to make him leave. “You’ll know her by her voice. Squeaky.”

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As usual, my first impressions of the students prove correct. The intelligent ones show their intelligence and the annoying ones show their annoyingness more and more as the year goes on. The high-ponytail girls who were polite and pleasant on the first day continue to be polite and pleasant, and they make my job bearable. The scrawny, sniffly, nerdy boys who’ve yet to hit their growth spurts remain scrawny and start sniffing more and more as the weather gets colder. A

small freckled kid who I noticed periodically licking his left hand during the first week begins to lick both his hands, and does so with increasing frequency, until I feel the need to set a bottle of hand sanitizer on his desk and encourage him to use it, to prevent the spread of germs. In short, they're a typical "highly gifted" class. Some good ones, some weird ones, some total freaks.

Then there's Squeaky, whose voice only gets shriller and whinier, and who begins to drive me more and more insane. She makes it her *raison d'être* to taunt and torment me. First, it's the Diet Coke. One morning, during science, I'm opening a Diet Coke, and Squeaky shoots her hand into the air. I try to ignore her, but she eventually starts waving it around, so finally I call on her. I try to give her the benefit of the doubt. Maybe she has a question. But that's my first mistake, because Squeaky *never* has questions. She knows everything, and her mission in life is to bring the rest of us up to speed. "Did you know Diet Coke is actually less healthy for you than regular Coke?" she asks.

"Did you know that's actually a myth perpetuated by the media to get you to buy more regular Coke?" I shoot back.

"But that doesn't make any—" I cut her off and continue on with the lesson. You have to nip these kinds of things in the bud before they escalate and you lose control completely. But Squeaky is not easily nipped. The next day, she brings an article, printed from the internet, about the dangers of diet sodas, and leaves it on my desk. I don't say anything to her about the article, but I don't call on her again for the rest of the week, and I take a few points off of her Friday quiz for lack of neatness, which isn't unfair, because she does have messy writing. But she doesn't stop. During one lesson, she spends twenty minutes with her hand in the air before finally blurting out, "You have a stain on your shirt." She doesn't say "Diet Coke stain," but that's clearly what it is, and it's obvious to all of us that she's still fighting that inane battle. The class and I collectively roll our eyes.

"And *you* clearly need braces," I tell her. "Nobody's perfect, but sometimes there's nothing we can do." That shuts her up for a while.

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I do my best to keep Squeaky in her place and out of my hair. I move her to the back of the classroom, next to the hand licker. She makes such a fuss there, constantly complaining about the kid touching her or her stuff after licking his

hands, that I move her back to the front again, but as far away from my desk as possible, close to the door. I ask her to limit herself to raising her hand twice per class. When this fails, I tell her that her voice is migraine inducing (it is), and that I'd prefer for her not to speak at all. None of this works. She only becomes louder, squeakier, and more annoying as the year goes on.

The other kids roll their eyes at her. They are on my side. "She's so annoying," they say when she excuses herself to the restroom, as she's started to do with excessive frequency. I don't complain. Personally, I'd like her to spend the entirety of blocks A and B in the restroom. Certain students occasionally defend Squeaky or take her side about things, but I don't worry about them. It's always the other wannabe rebels who identify with and stick up for her, never the high-ponytail girls, who are by now very popular and pretty much control the dominant opinion of the class. The high-ponytail girls are on my side, and that is what is important.

I do my best to ignore Squeaky's constant whining and focus on being the outstanding teacher I know myself to be. I play disaster movies during science class to keep things exciting. I bring my guitar to school and play a song I wrote to help the students memorize all the elements in the periodic table. ("You didn't write this," Squeaky says. "I've heard it before in a YouTube video. And my mom says there's no point in memorizing the periodic table because it's a resource, like a dictionary. What's important is learning how to read it, and you haven't taught us to do that at all.") I create bonus questions at the end of tests to reward students who have been listening carefully to my jokes and anecdotes. I give extra points for students who can write the best blonde joke of their own. I give two dollars to any student who wants to go down the hall and buy me a Diet Coke from the vending machine—one dollar for the Coke and one for the student to keep, out of generosity. ("I feel like this is illegal somehow," Squeaky complains.)

One day, during math class, I get to the end of an example problem on the board and find that I have come to the wrong answer, as sometimes happens. As I'm going back through my work, trying to find where I went wrong, I hear a squeak from the back of the room. "You forgot to distribute the negative." I am at my breaking point.

"Do you want to teach the class?" I ask, turning around and tossing Squeaky the whiteboard marker. It's an easy toss, but instead of catching it she sits there

and lets the marker hit her in the face.

“Oh my god!” she screams, eyes filling up with crocodile tears. “You just threw a marker at me!”

“I threw it *to* you,” I correct.

“You practically just assaulted me!” she shrieks.

I feel my face getting hot but I keep my cool. “Get out,” I tell her. She just sits there. “Get out!” I repeat. I say it as calmly as I can, but still she makes a show of cowering in fear before finally getting up and leaving the room. She slumps out, looking as defeated as proud little Squeaky could ever be, and I wonder if at last my classroom will have peace.

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For a while, we do. Squeaky works silently at her desk in the back of the room, not challenging or questioning me, not even rolling her eyes. Weeks pass this way, and just when I think that she’s finally learned her lesson, she comes into my classroom at the end of the school day, sweaty and wearing her P.E. uniform. Her stringy brown hair clings to her forehead and I feel immediately disgusted. “I know you don’t like me,” she starts, and I wonder if she’s finally ready to apologize for all that she’s done. “I’m applying to private school, and I need you to fill out this form.” She hands me a piece of paper, damp around the edges from being gripped between her sweaty fingers.

I fight back a laugh. “You can’t be serious.” Of course Squeaky hasn’t changed. She’s always believed she was too good for this school, and now she has an opportunity to prove it.

“I would ask anyone else if I could, trust me.” She isn’t as feisty as usual today, but I know better than to let my guard down. “They absolutely require a recommendation from your current math teacher.”

“Fine,” I say, taking the form. I’m a forgiving man, and above all else I am a good teacher. I won’t refuse to fill out Squeaky’s form if she needs me to, even after the way she’s treated me.

She doesn’t even say thank you. As soon as the sweaty paper is in my hand she just turns and walks out the door. I quickly fill out the form as honestly as I can, knowing my truthful assessment will probably prevent her from being admitted. Sooner or later she’s going to have to learn that she might not be as special as she thinks.

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I enjoy three Squeaky-free weeks of Christmas vacation and return to school feeling more boisterous than ever, knowing that if I am not able to bring Squeaky down to size, the private-school rejection will. Satisfied that she will soon be taken care of, I refocus my energy onto the rest of my students. I realize I have been somewhat neglecting them, and they are not as relaxed and close to me as my students normally are at this point in the year.

But that will all change soon. I scour the internet for good jokes to tell them and casually pass by the spot where the high-ponytail girls sit during lunch to have little chats with them. I familiarize myself with their social dynamics and make sure to compliment the cool ones and tease the nerds good-naturedly, so the high-ponytail girls know I'm on their team. When several of the least-nerdy boys crowd around my desk to ask about the photograph of my girlfriend, I know that we are back on track.

It's a small picture in a silver frame, showing the beautiful dark-haired woman wearing a red dress and looking back at me over her shoulder. "Who is that?" one of the boys asks, as someone always does when the students first notice the photograph. When I tell them she's my girlfriend, the boys' eyes go wide. The rest of the class crowds over to see. Everyone admires the woman in the picture, and then they admire me by association.

"Wow," the boys say. I keep the photograph around on purpose. It helps me improve my rapport with students, raises their esteem for me a little bit.

Then there is a nasally screech from the back of the crowd. "That's not your girlfriend," Squeaky declares. The other students become silent, waiting to see how I will respond. Suddenly, everything is on the line. "What's her name?" Squeaky demands.

"Carla," I reply, without hesitating.

"Birthday?"

"June 14th." This time, I will prove Squeaky wrong once and for all.

"Take the picture out of the frame and let me look at it," she demands.

"Why?" I ask, incredulous. The other kids are quiet, watching, ready at any moment to shift their allegiance away from me if I fail to prove myself to them.

"So I can see if it's a real photograph."

I wish, desperately, that I could take the photograph out of the frame and

show the other students once and for all that Squeaky is not to be trusted. But the truth is, the woman in the picture is not my girlfriend. The photo is from an advertisement in a magazine that I liked. I cut it out and framed it, and I don't see any harm in keeping it there. And the fact that Squeaky happened to guess the truth somewhat correctly, just this once, doesn't prove anything. But the other students may not see it that way.

I am left with no choice and assign Squeaky detention for harassing me. She cries and bemoans the "unfair and illegitimate punishment" but eventually submits and trudges out of the room. The students shuffle back to their seats, but they seem hesitant, possibly even suspicious of me. I realize that Squeaky is a greater threat to my authority than I had anticipated, and vow to remain vigilant for future attacks.

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Squeaky likes to talk incessantly about her father, who is divorced from her mother and lives in Hawaii. She only sees him a couple times a year, when he comes home for a visit. Still, she talks about him constantly, how long he's been gone, and when he'll be coming home. On Friday she tells us all that he's coming for a visit, and then on Monday she spends much of A-block babbling to her desk mate about his latest change in plans, and how disappointed she is that he won't be coming home for another month.

Before I can stop myself, I say, "I'm not surprised. If I had a daughter as annoying as you, I'd stay away longer too." In an instant, her eyes are full of crocodile tears, and she jumps from her chair and runs for the door.

Most of the students are busily working, ignoring Squeaky's hysterical outburst. But then one of the sassier high-ponytail girls, a popular kid who sometimes teases me, but only because we are friends, looks right at me and narrows her eyes. "Why do you have to be such a jerk all the time?" she asks. At first, I think she's kidding, and I start to laugh. The high ponytails are on my side. But she just keeps glaring. "You know she spends half her life crying in the bathroom, right?" She shakes her head and turns back to her worksheet.

Somehow, even in her weakness, Squeaky has bested me again.

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I spend Easter vacation reassessing my classroom strategy. I feel like my students are slipping away. They've started to seem less and less interested in my jokes. Their conversations fizzle out when I try to join.

When we come back from vacation, I work harder than ever to maintain whatever rapport I have left with the high-ponytail girls, which isn't much. Whenever one of them is absent, I sit in the empty seat, so I can talk casually with the others as a friend and equal. After a couple of weeks, things are almost back to normal. During B-block on Friday, we're having a good time, and I have a group of students in the front row laughing at my jokes. I conclude a long anecdote about an old boss of mine whose kid ended up being a student in my class a few years back. "Life is so ironic sometimes," I say, and the high-ponytail girls nod in agreement.

"That's actually not ironic," Squeaky mutters, without looking up from her worksheet. "It's just a coincidence." I tell her she doesn't understand the definition of irony, and she looks at me as if even my presence in her field of vision is a threat to her superior intelligence. "Irony," she speaks slowly, as if trying to make a child understand something too complicated for them to grasp, "results from a surprising reversal of expectations."

"And I never expected my boss's kid to be in my class," I reply. The high-ponytail girls laugh. Squeaky mutters something under her breath that I don't quite catch, but I think I hear the word "ignorant."

"You're right," I tell her. "You're too smart for all of us. You should just go off to your fancy private school. Too bad you're never going to get in, because I wrote the truth about you on your recommendation form, and no school would ever let you in after reading it." The high-ponytail girls are quiet now, looking down at their math papers and pretending not to hear, and I wonder if I've gone too far. But I stay focused on Squeaky, waiting to see if this will be the thing that finally breaks her. I want to watch the look on her face when reality comes crashing in.

Instead, she looks at me smugly. "I already got in," she smirks. I don't believe it. She's lying, she must be. I shake my head. "The school called my mom about the recommendation months ago. They said it was an absurd rant that didn't match what any of my other recommenders said about me. They told her

they were disregarding it from my file.” She sits back in her chair, smiling. I feel my face growing red. A few giggles bubble up around the room, but I can’t bring myself to look around and see which of my students are laughing at me. Instead, I walk out the door, get in my truck, and drive away.

I call the front office and tell them I have the flu. “You couldn’t have let us know before you left campus?” the sixth-grade dean asks. But they accept it, and I spend the next few days at home, eating microwaved frozen burritos and using up the large store of sick days I’ve acquired over the years. I don’t know how I can face my class again. I can’t stand to see the nauseating shine in Squeaky’s eyes as she confronts me with the truth of her victory.

But eventually my sick days run out, and I am forced to return. I don’t mention anything about my sudden departure and neither do the students. Any credence I once had with them has vanished. I don’t care. I ignore the students completely, even my high-ponytail friends, who turned out not to be very good friends after all. I play earthquake safety videos during class and sit at the back of the room watching YouTube. I won’t let these nerds shame me. I don’t care what they think.

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Two weeks before the end of the school year, Squeaky comes to class wearing a sweatshirt from her new school. She brags to everyone about how excited she is to leave us next year and go somewhere where her intellectual curiosity will actually be appreciated. She really says that. And the other students eat it up. They ask her all about her new school, and feel the insides of her sweatshirt sleeves, exclaiming to each other about how soft they are. Even the high-ponytail girls are interested. They ask about the uniform she is going to wear, and the bus she is going to take to get to the school, which is on the other side of town. Some of them even tell her they are going to miss her.

The bell rings and the students shuffle out to lunch, but Squeaky stays behind. “The best part of all,” she says, looking right at me, “is that I never have to see you again.” It’s all too much, seeing her revel in her triumph like this. I won’t let her rub it in my face. I try to ignore her, but she just stands there smirking until I can’t take it anymore, and I’m forced to act.

I barely even think about what I say, just make some remark to get her

out of there, and it works. It isn't anything terrible, just a casual joke, not even worth mentioning the exact words. And then she is gone, and I crack open a Diet Coke and turn up the volume on my YouTube video until I forget all about Squeaky and the futility of the recommendation form that I poured my heart into to no avail.

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When Squeaky doesn't show up to school the next day, I'm not worried, and I definitely don't think for even a second that her absence has anything to do with the very casual, not-at-all-a-big-deal joke that I made the day before. Annoying as she can be, Squeaky isn't stupid. She knows when I'm only kidding.

I find teaching difficult, and the kids are rowdy, so I put on a movie and retreat to the back of the classroom to watch YouTube. B-block is almost over when an eighth-grader comes into my room. She's one of the kids who choose to work as an office assistant during her elective period, and she hands me a note from the sixth-grade dean asking me to meet with him during lunch. I look at the short note for a long time, scrawled in the dean's messy printing. There's no clue as to what he wants to meet about. The thin paper of the note quickly becomes damp in my hand and I have to set it down and wipe my palms on my cargo shorts.

Walking down the long outdoor corridor between my classroom and the front office, I remind myself that I have no reason to worry. The dean knows that I am an excellent teacher. Everyone at this school knows that. There's no reason to think that this meeting and Squeaky's absence are in any way connected, or that either has anything to do with the joke I told yesterday, the joke I had to tell in order to force Squeaky to finally leave me alone.

I enter the dean's office with a confident smile and he looks up at me and sighs. "Please, sit down," he says. He's frowning and knitting together his brows, giving me the same concerned look Mr. Nancy likes to give me when he comes into my class to borrow scissors and sees me at the back of the room watching YouTube.

The dean sighs again, letting me sweat a little longer. Finally, he says, "Rachel Finn-Lohmann's mom was here today. She said you told her daughter you wanted to drag her out into the forest and shoot her." There is silence. He lets the accusation sit in the air.

"It was a joke," I tell him.

He sighs again. "So, you did say that, then?"

"She knew I was kidding. She even laughed."

"Her mom disagrees. She says her daughter saw the statement as a threat. Rachel is too afraid to come to school." I almost laugh at the ridiculous idea of Squeaky being afraid of me.

"I'm the one who should be afraid," I tell the dean. "This kid has been stalking me and tormenting me all year. She's just trying to get me in trouble. Why would you believe anything she says?"

Without looking up, the dean replies, "Well, we spoke with Mr. Yancey, and he says that other students have mentioned some inappropriate and mean-spirited comments you've made toward Rachel throughout the year. So we're going to have to do some further investigating." Unbelievable. I knew that homo couldn't be trusted.

The dean makes some notes on a form in front of him. Then he adds, "If this were the first complaint, that would be one thing. But after what happened with Ashley last year . . ."

"Ashley was a discipline issue," I interrupt. "I thought we agreed on that. She was a class clown. She was always trying to get attention in inappropriate ways." And for all that sense of humor she supposedly had, she never laughed at any of *my* jokes.

"And the stuff with Miranda."

"That goth girl? Come on, that was years ago. And *she* was bullying *me*. Seriously, I am the victim of this situation. And not to make things personal, but without actual classroom experience, I think it's really hard for you to understand the difficulties of managing students like these. I'm doing the best I can here."

The dean sighs again. "Listen, I still have to consult with the principal before we decide whether to move forward with a disciplinary hearing. But you should know the girl's mother was very, very angry when I met with her today. And frankly, I understand why. Joke or not, language like that has no place in our school." I can't help but roll my eyes. The dean notices. "You can go," he tells me, and I get up to leave. "But I would suggest calling Rachel's mother to apologize, if you don't want her to press charges." Seeing the skeptical look on my face, he adds, "It's a very real possibility, and I would be feeling pretty worried right now if I were you."

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Back in my empty classroom, I dig through my desk drawers until I find this year's directory. Squeaky's home phone number is listed under her name, and I dial it and get the voicemail, an automated recording telling me to leave a message after the tone. I begin explaining who I am, and why I am calling, but before I can even get into my conflict with Squeaky, I am cut off. The automated recording returns, telling me that my message is too long. "Goodbye," the machine tells me, before hanging up. But I can't give up yet. I need to make Squeaky's mother understand that this is not my fault, that no charges need to be pressed, that this is all a big misunderstanding.

So I call again. I start from the beginning, explaining that Squeaky has been harassing me since September. I try to help her mother understand the difficulties of being a teacher, the necessity of maintaining absolute authority within the domain of the classroom, which her daughter has made impossible with her constant criticism of me. I tell about the interruptions, how none of the other students can learn when Squeaky is in the room. I tell her that we have all been going slowly insane because of her daughter's terrorizing presence in my classroom. The machine cuts me off again. I redial.

"As I was saying, your daughter has been stalking me incessantly for several months now." I explain the annoyances, the migraines, the feeling of being chipped away at from both the outside and the inside. I explain that Squeaky knew how to push my buttons, that she sought my attention, that the sound of her voice brought bile into the back of my throat. "She was obsessed with me, and I couldn't take it anymore . . ." Again, the beeping, the automated recording informing me that I've reached the time limit.

Almost automatically, I punch back in the numbers that I now have memorized. "Anyway, I couldn't take it anymore, but what I said, which is not exactly what your daughter says I said, the thing that I did say, was meant as a joke, which was very clear in the moment, and I'm sure that your daughter is not confused. She is simply lying, because she wants to see me suffer." I go on, become very humorous and relatable, include some charming anecdotes of the ways that I have discouraged Squeaky's poor behavior in the past. I play the role of the tired but charming teacher, the role of myself, and I play it well.

Eventually I am cut off again, and this time when I call back, I am told that

there is no more room on the machine. But it doesn't matter. Maybe I could've said more, but my story is more or less complete. I've explained everything, and any reasonable person listening would understand that I am not to blame for Squeaky's ridiculous overreaction. I am satisfied.

Then a thought occurs to me. Squeaky has talked before about her mother's intense career, how she works a lot. And with her dad still off in Hawaii doing god knows what, where is Squeaky today? Most likely she is home, by herself, listening to my messages as I leave them. Quite possibly, quite probably, she is deleting them one by one so that her mother will never hear my dignified and illuminating explanations. And when her mother does finally get home from work, Squeaky will goad and pester her, as she is known to do, exaggerating my joke, which she calls a "threat," and making me into a monster, until her mother gives in and takes the most extreme course of action against me, never realizing that it is her daughter who is deserving of extreme measures.

The satisfaction I felt after leaving the messages is quickly draining, and I wonder if charges really might be pressed against me. I can just picture Squeaky in court, pointing her finger at me, impressing the jury with her large vocabulary as she lists off her many complaints. "He always has Diet Coke stains on his shirt," she will say. "And he watches internet videos on the computer when he is supposed to be teaching us." The jury will collectively shake their heads. "He uses words incorrectly and often forgets to distribute the negative when solving equations using the distributive property." These complaints may be accurate, but they are not crimes. Still, they will make me seem weak to the court, and when Squeaky finally gets to her biggest complaint, her audience will already have made up their minds to believe her.

On the neat square page of the directory, Squeaky's name glowers at me, sitting indolently atop the names of her parents. Underneath the phone number there is an address. I log onto my computer and enter the address into a mapping website, and learn that Squeaky lives a quick fifteen-minute drive from school, in a quaint little canyon by the beach, one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in the city. With an unsettled feeling in my stomach, I leave my classroom. My truck is parked on the pavement outside the squat beige building, and as I turn the key in the ignition, I think about Squeaky calling my jokes "offensive" and my teaching "ineffective." I think about her eagerness to correct my mistakes, see the self-satisfied smile that spreads across her face when she realizes she knows

something I don't. I see her eyes welling up with those goddamn crocodile tears, and the high-ponytail girls glaring at me as if somehow I am the monster.

I wind down into the canyon, past nicer and nicer homes, until I arrive on a narrow tree-lined street and scan the numbers on the houses. Squeaky lives in a disgusting monstrosity of a mansion. It's a tall concrete structure with narrow rectangular windows stretching up the entire front side, and a high metal gate that towers between the yard and the street. There's a buzzer, and I buzz. There is no response. I wait a minute and then buzz again.

After a while I start fiddling with the gate. The flat metal panels look foreboding, but my wrists happen to be unusually thin and it's actually quite easy to reach through and undo the lock. I approach the front door. It's locked, too, so I ring the bell. I look up, and there's Squeaky in the window, staring at me. When she sees me, her eyes go wide and then she disappears, but not before I spot the telephone she is gripping in her grubby little fist. It's like she wants me to know that she deleted the messages. I start to get the feeling that she is taunting me purposefully. The front door, made of frosted glass, seems like it would easily shatter if something heavy were thrown into it. I take a deep breath. There must be other entrances.

Squeaky's backyard is a maze of rocks and cacti. The back door is also glass, but not frosted. I find that it is also locked. I look inside, but it's hard to see anything other than a long hallway. I knock on the door. "Rachel!" I call, trying to sound amicable. "Rachel! I just want to talk to you!" I get no response.

I wonder if she might try to sneak out the front door while I am busy at the back, and consider returning to the sidewalk to wait. I consider the possibilities, of which there are several, for how I can come out victorious, finally, in this last battle of our long war. I consider the rocks, ranging in size from pebbles to boulders, and the thickness of the glass. I consider the large tree, with many sturdy-seeming branches, stretching up past second- and third-story windows, some of which are open, curtains blowing in the dry breeze.

I consider Diet Coke and YouTube, and the new students in the fall who will know nothing of Squeaky and her challenges to my authority. I consider the sound of cars on the oceanfront highway a few blocks away and the distant sirens. I consider the punchline, "Because she can't find the eleven." I consider it all and the plan is on the tip of my tongue, but I can't make up my mind and then I know it is already too late.

The sirens grow louder until they stop, and suddenly there are several uniformed police officers in the backyard, and one of them says, “Drop the weapon.” I don’t know what she’s talking about until I look down and see a large rock in my hands. I look at the rock and at the glass back door and I know what it looks like, but I only wanted to check to see if the messages had been deleted, and I was only trying to protect myself from the lies Squeaky was spreading about me, and if I’m not allowed to protect myself from her false and ridiculous allegations, then what kind of country are we even living in?

“Drop the weapon!” the female cop shrieks again, another ludicrous exaggeration. But I drop the rock, and a moment later I am being handcuffed, without any chance to explain what is happening here—to tell the cops that they have been tricked, just like everyone else.

“I am a teacher,” I tell them, as they pull me roughly across the yard, back toward the street, which is now full of cop cars, way more than is necessary. “I’m an excellent teacher, beloved, ask any of my students, other than that one, and they’ll tell you the truth.” The plethora of cars and officers suggest, ridiculously, that I am a dangerous criminal, and it’s all I can do not to start laughing at the irony of it all.

The real danger has come out onto her front stoop, and she sits with a lady cop on the steps, pretending to cry. She can’t even look at me as I’m brought out to the car. I wonder if she feels guilty, finally, realizing what she’s done. “She’s the one you should be arresting,” I shout, turning toward Squeaky, but the officers quickly turn me back around, and I am shoved into the back of one of the cars.

As we wind our way back up the narrow canyon road, I imagine Squeaky as the one who is handcuffed, the one who is made to pay for what she’s done. I imagine the way she will cry and beg for forgiveness that won’t come. I imagine her groveling. And then, finally, turning, she will try to escape, but it will be too late. I imagine her wide-eyed, running, branches breaking underfoot. Imagine the pull, the bang, the crack, the thud, the ooze. Imagine the shallow breathing, the dulling of the eyes, the sagging open of her mouth as she lets out the last pathetic squeaks that she will ever utter.

