

As the Stomach Churns

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“Attention teachers: Bus 7 has just arrived. Please hold your attendance for Bus 7. Homeroom will be extended for five minutes.” The decibel level of this announcement—just like all the others that occur—oh, say, maybe twenty times during the course of the school day—is deafening. Of course, you could turn down the dial on your classroom intercom, but then again, you wouldn’t be able to hear a Las Vegas hotel implosion above the roar of the homeroom crowd.

C.J. is already there, sitting at his usual-but-not-assigned-seat—at the teacher’s desk in her padded chair, with his short, skinny, dirty legs dangling.

“Hey, C.J.,” someone calls out, “who died and made you Mrs. Kaye?”

C.J., who is, unfortunately, used to being teased, yells, “Shut up! You stupid!”

I quickly and stealthily approach C.J., in part before this escalates, in part to give him the daily opportunity. “C.J.,” I whisper, “want to come and have breakfast?”

“No thanks,” he retorts as if I’d asked him, instead, to serve detention, his disdain blatant.

As I have every day for the last week, I sigh. These kids are all so stubborn and proud, I think. As I walk out of the room, I hear the growling of an empty stomach. I wonder if C.J. is reluctant to give up his prize seat. As I’ve failed to ask him, I won’t know, but what I do know is that C.J. is *not* going to have a very good day in school, as he will go until lunchtime feeling very hungry.

It’s like that for so many students: they don’t eat breakfast, won’t eat breakfast, *can’t* eat breakfast. The majority of our students receive free lunch, and—big surprise—our test scores have historically been low.

Jamez and his brother used to come to my room for cereal, milk, and fruit (and sometimes just a granola bar—the-chocolate chip-candy-kind; they would refuse the healthier ones), but the others teased them too much, so they stopped. And we all know that they were being teased out of envy—God knows how many other kids in our school need a morning meal. Maybe, then, that’s why C.J. wouldn’t come.

But he wasn’t like Jamez and Jejuan. Jejuan recently joined a gang, but not, I know in my heart, because he really wanted to. He is a nearly fifteen-year-old boy who

failed a grade once and nearly failed again (and why wasn't he tested first, like Jamez, who's been my student and has been doing fairly well?), and he lives in a drug house. What else was he supposed to do?

Jejuan was sent to The Trailer (which is, actually, a very nice, orderly, clean and well-run learning environment) for breaking the nose of an eighth grader who actually had it coming. This set all the teachers to laughter and gossip. They'd been hoping for this since almost the beginning of his sixth-grade year. It all worked out better for J.J., though: He received much more attention and discipline than he would have in the standard eighth grade classes. Last year, he was so depressed that he was hospitalized. That didn't happen this school year, so, well, you become thankful for the small things. And maybe, just maybe, he ate breakfast in The Trailer. I like to think that he did.

Jamez, on the other hand, was not a fighter. He is, in fact, the most resilient student I have met in my twenty-six-year career. He is fourteen now. He failed first grade, but he would not fail in the later grades, with his own voice—he was tested because *he* requested it! He approached the school social worker at the beginning of sixth grade, simply stating, “I need to see a social worker.” Just writing this brings tears to my eyes: he reads the newspaper (albeit during Math class, but there has to be an allowance made), frequently runs off to live with his sister (who we thought was stable—but, no, turns out, she's a druggie, too), and asks me for candy at least once a day (doesn't eat breakfast though). We're all rooting for him.

C.J. is another story. Last year he won a bike, (the first prize!) from the Humane Society. It was stolen within the week. He had been working with the woman known locally as “The Dog Lady”. They would ride around the poorest suburbs in the state looking for stray, hungry, abandoned dogs, feeding them and taking them to the shelter in the next town. Several teachers would periodically purchase dog biscuits or treats when shopping for their family's pet needs, giving them to a most grateful C.J. who would, without fail, politely acknowledge the kindness.

C.J.'s downfall, it appears, occurred recently when he was accused of dog stealing. As much as the social worker and I have attempted to pry it out of him, we have been unsuccessful in getting the whole story. The police were involved; that's all he would tell us. However, his present mangy appearance and sullen demeanor speaks

volumes: he is dirty and does not do his schoolwork. And—rather than come to eat breakfast—he feels more comfortable situated in the teacher’s chair.

So I leave the room. Upon my departure, I am mistakenly assaulted by a wadded-up foil potato chip bag (red hot!). Michael Jordan someone is not, but at least the wastebasket-misser said, “Sorry!” Bus 7 has finally arrived and evidence can be viewed throughout the corridor—I step on pop cans, discarded candy bar wrappers and—bingo!—in a smear of bubble gum. However, I am able to remove it from my shoe with an Egg McMuffin tissue.

Someone, at least, has eaten breakfast.