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BETTERLAND

A Play in Two Acts

by

David Lohrey

Cast of Characters

MISS VANDERHOFF: Handsome woman with a commanding presence. 59 years of age. Looks older.

MR. STILES: Early to mid-thirties. School district human resources director. A professional bureaucrat. Earnest, lacking imagination.

ALICIA: A Latina adolescent, 17; alert, playful, sassy. Vulnerable.

LAURIE: Intelligent, but incurious. Knows how to get what she wants. Strives to please.

BILLY: 18. Class clown, too slow for wit. Possesses cunning, some charm. Seeks to hide his fears, his desires.

LAFAYETTE: An African-American male, 18 years old, slim, compact, with an intense, sharp intelligence. Observant.

SCENE: The play takes place in a school district office. As MISS VANDERHOFF reminisces, the action moves to the classroom of an inner-city high school in east Los Angeles, where the students are primarily foreign born. No effort should be made to create a realistic urban classroom look; rather the essence should be captured by the presence of such essentials as a blackboard, teacher's desk, and the all-important PA speaker. Students may or may not be seated at traditional desks,

which could be placed on wheels to allow for maximum mobility. In the staging every effort must be made to create the congested, chaotic environment of today's schools. Despite the fact that the school population is represented by only four students, an opportunity is presented both before and after the commencement of instruction to recreate the interplay of "passing periods." Instead of traditional blackouts, scene changes might take place in full view of the audience, as appropriate music accompanies.

TIME: The action takes place over a period of one school semester. It is the present.

Scene 1

Setting: A modern classroom, only everything is askew. The blackboard dangles as though it were about to fall. The American flag is in shreds. The student desks appear as thrones, several feet above the stage floor; their tablet tops tipped at angles. The entire scene is lit in eerie colors and heavy shadows. Loud, disruptive cries and shrieks pierce the stage, the echoes of student banter from the corridors.

At Rise: MISS VANDERHOFF is dressed well if without flair. Three students in tableaux, perched in their throne-like desks. They hold giant pencils, sip from huge soda cups or water bottles. Their appearance is distorted, coarsened, and exaggerated.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Students! Billy, you too! The title "Women in Love" refers to what? Is Lawrence implying that the women are in love with themselves...

ALICIA

Oh, gross!

MISS VANDERHOFF

or with their men, their husbands? Why gross, Alicia?

(A cell phone begins to ring, at first muffled, then louder as BILLY takes it from his bag and answers:)

BILLY

(Speaking into his cell phone:)

Hey, man, where are you at?

MISS VANDERHOFF

Billy.

BILLY

(Into phone:)

Yeah. Naw, man, that's cool. I got class.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Billy?

BILLY

(To VANDERHOFF)

What up?

MISS VANDERHOFF

You'll to put that away. I'm trying to teach.

BILLY

(To VANDERHOFF)

You can teach.

(Into phone)

Yeah, I'm here. Just a little static.

MISS VANDERHOFF

I'll take that. Let's go.

(She holds out her hand)

BILLY

(To VANDERHOFF)

Where we going? Naw, it's not mine.

(Into phone:)

Let's hook up later. Cool, man.

(He puts the phone into his pocket.)

MISS VANDERHOFF

Billy.

(She holds out her hand.)

BILLY

Naw, man. It ain't mine. Here, look:

(He pulls it out again and demonstrates.)

I turned it off. It's off.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Very well, then. Now where was I?

LAURIE

You were asking about the women and...

ALICIA

You said they're lesbians or something.

MISS VANDERHOFF
I said no such thing.

BILLY
Muff divers.

ALICIA
Shut up, will you!

BILLY
Say please. I wanna hear you beg.

MISS VANDERHOFF
That's enough. That is enough. I don't want to hear any more of this.

BILLY
You say we gotta participate.

MISS VANDERHOFF
Well, you've participated enough for one day.

BILLY
Can I go?

MISS VANDERHOFF
You are going to "go" if you don't settle down.

(Billy's phone rings)

MISS VANDERHOFF(cont'd)
(She puts her hand out)
I'll take that. Right now.

BILLY
Will you give it back? It's not mine.

MISS VANDERHOFF
Hand it over and we'll talk. Otherwise it goes to security, who will not give it back.

(BILLY passes the phone to her.)

MISS VANDERHOFF

That's one kind of struggle. D. H. Lawrence wrote about struggle. The struggle to survive. The struggle to break free. The struggle to love. Why are his characters in so much pain?

(The dismissal bell rings.)

Well, then, class, I'd like to pick up on this theme tomorrow.

(The classroom disappears. Just as suddenly BILLY steps forward.)

BILLY

I came to get my phone.

MISS VANDERHOFF

I really shouldn't give it back to you.

BILLY

You promised.

MISS VANDERHOFF

You are not to have these things on campus. You know that.

BILLY

I told you it's not mine.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Then whose is it?

(Silence)

Send your friend to pick it up. I'll keep it for him.

(BILLY snatches it from her hand, and heads for the door. MISS VANDERHOFF blocks his way.)

MISS VANDERHOFF(cont'd)

Billy, you are making a serious mistake.

BILLY

Move your fat ass.

(He attempts to pass. MISS VANDERHOFF grabs his backpack strap, and when BILLY struggles to escape, she slaps him in the face.)

(Suddenly the lights come up bright. BILLY disappears. We are in office at the school district headquarters. It is a space with movable walls. Impersonal and temporary.)

MISS VANDERHOFF

And this is what Billy told you? This ridiculous story is, as you would have it, his side of the story. Isn't that what you said? Billy's version, as you call it?

MR. STILES

Yes. In a nutshell.

MISS VANDERHOFF

So it's a matter of his word against mine?

MR. STILES

I've just related Billy's version of the events, yes. Now I'd like to hear yours. How long have you been with the district?

MISS VANDERHOFF

Thirty-seven years. I'd always hoped to retire after forty, perhaps even make it to fifty, although I don't honestly see that now.

MR. STILES

Why wait? The district permits early retirement.

MISS VANDERHOFF

My mother taught for forty years. I've never had the desire to overtake her, but I had hoped to come close to matching her. Everything has become arbitrary. How can one make plans?

MR. STILES

We would all like to see you continue with the district, Miss Vanderhoff.

MISS VANDERHOFF

But I understand -- well, I've heard -- that I am to be transferred.

MR. STILES

Nothing has been decided.

MISS VANDERHOFF

But I've taught at the same school my entire life.

MR. STILES

I'm sure you would adjust to your new setting.

MISS VANDERHOFF

There's no stability.

MR. STILES

Change is a good thing. And you would be doing me a personal favor. We have hundreds of openings.

MISS VANDERHOFF

I shouldn't wonder. It's no pleasure being a schoolteacher in this day and age, and word, I'm afraid, has gotten out.

MR. STILES

You have had an impressive career. If it weren't for this unfortunate inci...

MISS VANDERHOFF

I never think of teaching as a career. After all, I was at the top of my profession from the first day I entered my classroom. There's no ladder in teaching. I always say: "You cannot go up. You can only go out." I've more or less lived in schools since childhood. Does my experience count for nothing? This "story" Billy's concocted...

MR. STILES

What I related to you is a summary of the police report.

MISS VANDERHOFF

So, I am to understand you actually believe Billy? That I hauled off and slapped the boy for nothing? You find this credible?

MR. STILES

I just need to ask you a few more questions. And then you can take me through the incident itself, to the best of your recollection.

MISS VANDERHOFF

I have a very good memory. I've always prided myself on my memory.

MR. STILES

I'm sure you do. If we do things right, you'll be able to return to the classroom.

MISS VANDERHOFF

"If we do things right..." What do you mean by that?

MR. STILES

Miss Vanderhoff, you must be aware of the position an incident of this kind places the school district. Children who have been.... Well, I should say, the parents--it's always the parents.... They are ruled by their emotions. It's not only money they are after.

MISS VANDERHOFF

I'm having trouble following your meaning, Mr. Stiles.

MR. STILES

Would you be averse to taking an early retirement? That is, if negotiations moved in that direction.

MISS VANDERHOFF

A forced retirement, after all these years? I thought we were only talking about a transfer.

MR. STILES

Obviously, we would prefer to keep you right where you are. But, just so that you are aware...

MISS VANDERHOFF

Absolutely not. No. Over this nonsense? No, of course, I won't. Why should I? I expect the School Board to back me up.

MR. STILES

If they can, I'm sure they will.

MISS VANDERHOFF

They have simply got to rein in these kids. Sometimes I don't know whether I work in a school or a penal institution. My colleague, Mrs. Wilson, had a raw egg thrown at her last week. It hit her in the back of her head. Now that's not a school. Teachers are afraid.

MR. STILES

The legislature has turned its back....

MISS VANDERHOFF

They have no business...

MR. STILES

And the parents.

MISS VANDERHOFF

They have replaced happiness for knowledge as the goal of education. You cannot begin to grasp what has happened until you see that everything is organized to defeat learning. Once you have seen this, it all falls into place. It's all about housing, temporary guardianship, appeasement. The authorities calculate that ignorance is a small price to be paid. They are killing you, but you must pretend to be advancing.

MR. STILES

I can tell you right now: if you talk like that at the hearing, you are going to get yourself into trouble.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Nobody wants to face the truth. It's all C.Y.A., C.Y.A., as if you can teach children while trying to cover your...

MR. STILES

...And you've left yours considerably exposed. Let's be frank: my job is to investigate this matter, and to report my findings to the legal affairs department. I am not a lawyer. I can function on your behalf, as an advocate of sorts, but I must believe that your actions were motivated by your desire to serve the educational needs of the children.

(Reading from the file)

"She was once a dedicated teacher."

MISS VANDERHOFF

What was that? You were quoting something...

(A loud bell sounds; lights up as students reenter.)

MR. STILES

From the remarks in your personnel file. They are highly complimentary.

(As three students swirl about class, the din of hundreds of students changing classes can be heard: locker doors being slammed shut, exotic cries, insane laughter. The students' movements, gestures, and behavior create the atmosphere of an entire class. A second bell rings. They take their seats. The classroom has been restored to normal. It is January)

MISS VANDERHOFF

I want to say Carmen. Carmen?

ALICIA

Carmen's checked out, Miss V.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Why don't you start us off, then? Do you have your book?

ALICIA

"By the winner of the Nobel prize..."

MISS VANDERHOFF

No, no, no, dear. Read the heavy, black, bold capital letters. That's the title. We went over this yesterday. Weren't you here? Oh! I see. Well, let me read first then. Don't look at me. I want to see all faces in the text. And be ready to repeat. "One Day In The Life of Ivan Denisovich." Repeat. Alicia.

ALICIA

One Day in the Leaf of Ivan Denisovich...

MISS VANDERHOFF

No, no. Life. One Day in The Liiife..." Repeat, Alicia.

ALICIA

One Day in The Leaf...

MISS VANDERHOFF

Liiife. L-I-F-E. Life. Like lie. Lie. Don't lie. Life: repeat everyone.

ALL

LIFE.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Excellent. Leeee - Liiii. Leaf - life. I have a leaf. I don't have a life. "One Day In The Life of Ivan Denisovich." Repeat.

STUDENTS

"One Day In The Life of Ivan Denisovich."

MISS VANDERHOFF

(SHE speaks to STILES:)

Yes, that's right, by Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

(The bell rings a third time)

PRINCIPAL'S VOICE

(Over the loudspeaker; an intrusive, loud interruption)

Please excuse the interruption.

MISS VANDERHOFF

(To the Heavens:)

Do we have a choice?

PRINCIPAL'S VOICE

Teachers: please disregard that last bell. Today we are on a normal schedule. Students are to remain in their classrooms. Students: if you have been released, go back to class immediately. Students found out of class will be assigned detention. Thank you for your cooperation.

MISS VANDERHOFF

(Again to STILES. He may move among the students, but must always remain "invisible" to them)

The Principal had me send home permission slips, because the Solzhenitsyn, while expressing an altogether wholesome and, in my opinion, uplifting theme, is nevertheless filled with the sort of vulgar expressions one would expect to hear in a prison. Only one parent objected, so I banish their daughter to the library to read Judy Blume.

(Slight pause)

Willful ignorance is on the rise in this country.

(Now SHE addresses the students:)

Now, children...

ALICIA

Children?

MISS VANDERHOFF

...why do you suppose the author has chosen to write about a single day in the life of our hero? Anyone? No one? Does everyone understand the question? Billy? Why has the author chosen to dwell on the mundane details of the prisoners' lives?

BILLY

To make it longer? Yeah, to make the story longer.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Laurie? Why only one day and not the entirety of Shukhov's sentence?

LAURIE

Well, he wants to show what it's like to be him. I mean, it's only one day, but it could be any old day, I guess.

MISS VANDERHOFF

All right. I think you are on the right track. And how, then, does the story begin? At what time of day? This is rather obvious, is it not? Billy?

BILLY

I don't know. I didn't get that far.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Didn't get that far? It's in the very first paragraph. Would anyone care to read that passage to Billy?

(MISS VANDERHOFF recognizes LAURIE)

LAURIE

"It was freezing cold, with a fog that caught your breath. Two large searchlights were crisscrossing over the compound from the watchtowers at the far corners."
"The lights on the perimeter..."

MISS VANDERHOFF

Is that the first paragraph? I don't think so.

(Finding the passage)

No. I wanted to hear the passage right at the start which establishes the time of day. But, thank you all the same.

(SHE reads)

"The ringing noise came faintly on and off through the windowpanes covered with ice more than an inch thick, and died away fast." Do you see where we are now, Laurie? Alicia? How about you, Billy? Are you with me?

BILLY

I got it.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Then why don't you pick up where I left off?

BILLY

(Reads poorly, mumbling to hide his uncertainty)
"Shukhov always got up at reveille, but today he didn't.
He'd been feeling lousy since the night before - with
aches and pains and the shivers..."

ALICIA

I can't hear.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Sssshhh! Just follow along. Go ahead, Billy.

BILLY

"...and he just couldn't manage to keep warm that night.
In his sleep he'd felt very sick and then again a little
better. All the time he dreaded the morning."

MISS VANDERHOFF

All right, let's stop for a moment. Now, we ought to be
able to understand this, Shukhov's state of mind. How is
he feeling and why?

(No response)

Can we look again at the text? Billy? Alicia? Now,
quit fooling around over there. **"All the time he dreaded
the morning."** Why is that? Why did he dread the
morning? Why was he not eager to greet the day? Surely,
you can relate to this? Anyone? I can, dreading the
morning, hating to get up in the morning, but there is an
interesting twist here. Did anyone catch it? Laurie?
Do you dread the morning?

LAURIE

No.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Why is that?

LAURIE

I'm a morning person.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Are you? I dread getting out of bed because it is so
comfortable, but Shukhov... Is his bed cozy?

LAURIE

No, he's sick, and he's cold, but it's even worse
outside. And he hates work.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Does he? We'll touch on that later. Laurie, what page did you get to?

(There is loud knocking at the door)

MISS VANDERHOFF (cont'd)

Just a moment, class.

(SHE opens the classroom door)

LAFAYETTE

(Standing in door)

This Room 108?

MISS VANDERHOFF

(To LAFAYETTE:)

I'm afraid there's been some mistake. This is a Senior elective, and your papers indicate that you are a Junior.

LAFAYETTE

The lady in the office said to come to Room 108.

MISS VANDERHOFF

We'll see to that later. Class, your attention, please. This is Lafayette Braxton, who is coming to us from Mount Hermon Senior High. Won't you take a seat?

(SHE sets a book before LAFAYETTE; sotto voce:)

I don't want you to feel left out. We've just begun, so you don't have much catching up to do. Why don't you get started?

(LAFAYETTE pushes the book aside)

MISS VANDERHOFF (cont'd)

Very well then.

(To STILES:)

You can't make them learn. And I've given up trying.

(To class:)

Ready? Laurie, what page did you get to?

LAURIE

Page six, Miss Van.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Excellent, dear. And your glossary, Alicia? Would you share with the class the new words you learned today?

ALICIA

The first one was "Reveille."
(Pronounces as "Revile")

MISS VANDERHOFF

"Revile?" I don't recall seeing that in the text. Spell it, won't you?

ALICIA

R-E-V-E-I-L-L-E.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Oh, no, that's not "revile," sweetheart, that's "reveille." Reveille. Repeat everyone.

ALICIA and LAURIE

Reveille.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Yes, reveille. It appeared in the passage Billy just read, didn't it, Billy?

BILLY

I guess.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Yes, and what does "reveille" mean? Laurie, were you and Alicia able to find it in the dictionary?

LAURIE

To keep watch...

ALICIA

Or to stay awake?

MISS VANDERHOFF

Well, not exactly, but its etymology is related to that, the act of keeping vigil, or vigilance. Well done, ladies. However, we are looking for the French, not the Latin meaning.

(MISS VANDERHOFF plays reveille on her fist as a bugle)

BILLY

Daaaaamn.

(The STUDENTS fall into gales of laughter)

MISS VANDERHOFF

Thank you, class.

BILLY

That's some blow, man.

(BILLY begins to imitate MISS VANDERHOFF)

That's some shit.

MISS VANDERHOFF

That's quite enough, Billy. Thank you.

(Strutting around, BILLY blows wildly into ALICIA'S ear)

ALICIA

Ow! You fucking asshole!

MISS VANDERHOFF

STOP THAT! Right this minute. WILL YOU STOP?

(BILLY gives another blast, and bursts out laughing)

MISS VANDERHOFF (cont'd)

What? I have to beg?

(BILLY finally stops)

MISS VANDERHOFF (cont'd)

Why must you always ruin a good thing? Why? I'd like to know. I really would. I'd really like to know.

(The dismissal bell sounds)

MISS VANDERHOFF (cont'd)

Students, don't forget: that's two sentences for each vocabulary word. And I want your vocabulary journals tomorrow at the beginning of class.

(The STUDENTS make for the door)

MISS VANDERHOFF (cont'd)

Billy! Lafayette! Boys, I'd like to see your schedules. You both have Mr. Sullivan, don't you? I'll write you passes. We need to have a little talk.

BILLY

I ain't got nothing to say.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Few people do, but I appreciate your candor, Billy. I'll be doing most of the talking.

BETTERLAND

I-1-16

LAFAYETTE

I ain't got nothing to do with this fool.

MISS VANDERHOFF

I know you are not involved, Lafayette, but I would like you to hear what I have to say. You're new here, and...

LAFAYETTE

...Shit.

MISS VANDERHOFF

...it wouldn't hurt for you to hear...

LAFAYETTE

Naw, man, I gotta jam.

(LAFAYETTE exits)

MISS VANDERHOFF

Lafayette!

(BILLY starts to follow LAFAYETTE out)

MISS VANDERHOFF (cont'd)

Don't you dare!

(BILLY stops)

MISS VANDERHOFF (cont'd)

You walk out now and you'll only be proving that you've got as little sense as he does.

BILLY

You're putting me down.

MISS VANDERHOFF

What do you expect? A kiss?

BILLY

I wouldn't kiss you...

MISS VANDERHOFF

You think I can allow you to come in here day after day acting the fool? Do you want me to turn things over to you?

BILLY

No.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Last week someone broke into your locker. Do you think it was me? Would I steal your bicycle?

BILLY

I never said that.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Who then?

BILLY

What are you talking about?

MISS VANDERHOFF

It's you, Billy - you and your friends. You're the ones throwing milk cartons, writing all over the desks. Aren't you the ones who plug up the toilets and set off the fire alarms?

BILLY

I never touched the fire alarm.

MISS VANDERHOFF

You foul your own nest. Surely you remember from last semester what happened to the little boys who got stranded without adult supervision on a tropical island.

BILLY

That stupid-ass book? That's got nothing to do with me.

MISS VANDERHOFF

I'm going to do my job, young man, and if you are planning to stay here in this classroom with me, you had better get about your business, because I am simply not going to have this behavior.

BILLY

Can I go now?

(BILLY exits)

MISS VANDERHOFF

(To STILES:)

It's bad enough having to fight that thing...

(Pointing to the PA)

...without having to contend with Billy's antics.

STILES

You've just got to find a way to show how much you care.

MISS VANDERHOFF

You seem to forget that at 3 o'clock I get to go home. They may say, "I'm outta here," but where have they got to go? Within forty-five minutes, I'm back in Betterland. No more foul-mouthed youths, no more of this..., no more of them. No one asks me how old I am, or why my bosom is so big. I return to civilization.

STILES

You're saying the kids aren't civilized?

MISS VANDERHOFF

I'm saying it's all about training, not caring - that's sentimental rubbish. The best teachers are tough. They don't ask you, they make you. Fear is no small ingredient of determination.

STILES

You can't get me to believe you don't love the kids.

END OF SCENE

Scene 2

Setting: MISS VANDERHOFF's classroom. A new day, about a month later. February.

At Rise: MISS VANDERHOFF is leading class. All students are present.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Mid-term exams.

(Students emit moans and groans)

MISS VANDERHOFF (cont'd)

This semester I've decided to assign the personal essay. I'm convinced your writing will improve, if you write about things close to your heart. But I want you to remember our reading assignments. Let Solzhenitsyn be your inspiration. Remember: you must write out your first draft. And I will want to see that, but you are expected to commit your piece to memory. This is, after all, a recitation.

BILLY

We gotta?

MISS VANDERHOFF

I beg your pardon?

BILLY

Memorize. We gotta memorize the whole thing?

MISS VANDERHOFF

The whole thing, although the length is entirely up to you. You are to decide what and how much you care to tell us about yourself.

BILLY

What if we don't got nothing to say?

MISS VANDERHOFF

That never stopped anyone else before.

LAFAYETTE

What you want us to write about?

MISS VANDERHOFF

Anything you like, as long as it relates to your own life. You may consider using narrative irony, which we discussed last week in relation to Ivan Denisovich's spiritual awakening while living under inhuman conditions.

BILLY

I'm gonna talk about using a condom.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Drawn from personal experience, Billy, not your fantasies.

BILLY

Aaaaaahhhhhh. Hey, this is like show and tell, huhn? Watch, I'll bring in some jimmies and pass them around.
(Takes a condom from his wallet and tosses it)

ALICIA

That'll be interesting. I didn't know they make them so small.

BILLY

Who you talking about? You talking about me?
(Jumping up, hands on fly, ready to demonstrate)
Who's got a ruler?

MISS VANDERHOFF

Please sit, Billy. We've already had the Pledge of Allegiance.

(Everybody laughs; BILLY sits)

MISS VANDERHOFF (cont'd)

Oh, that reminds me. Your recitations may be on any incident or reminiscence you like, so long, Billy, as it is appropriate to a school setting - believe it or not, this is a school. But, class, tell me something vital, something you will never forget - and this can, of course, relate, say, to sport, perhaps a tournament you entered, a game you lost, a partner you fell in love with.

BILLY

Aaaaaahhhhhh.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Do you see? I would like you to think about what I've said, and begin working on your first drafts. Let's have introductions for Monday.

BILLY

Man, you never let up. Can't you give us a break?

MISS VANDERHOFF

You'll have your break at the end of term.

BILLY

That's not fair.

MISS VANDERHOFF

What's not fair?

BILLY

No one gives homework over the weekend.

LAURIE

Yes, they do. You just don't do it.

BILLY

Shut up, bitch.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Billy, out! Now that's enough of that.

BILLY

I want my weekends like the other kids.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Is that what this is all about?

BILLY

Hell yeah.

MISS VANDERHOFF

And it's not fair?

BILLY

Hell no. Huhn, Alicia?

ALICIA

Whatever.

MISS VANDERHOFF

All right, no homework for the weekend. Fair enough?

BILLY

Yeah.

(Suddenly suspicious)

Naw. You'll just give us more work later on.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Make up your mind. You want fair, you'll have fair.

LAURIE

My parents want me to have homework.

BILLY

Then you can have it.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Laurie gets homework, while everyone else has to stay home with nothing to do?

BILLY

Don't worry about it.

MISS VANDERHOFF

(SHE might include STILES in this.)

I once thought curiosity the natural charm of the young.

BILLY

What's that mean?

MISS VANDERHOFF

I had hoped to see you develop self-motivation. Is studying really such an ordeal?

LAFAYETTE

(Mockingly)

If you're going to be somebody, you gotta study.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Oooo, I like that, Lafayette. Sarcasm, you know, is a sign of intelligence.

(Brief pause)

My third grade teacher used to say, "if you want fair, join the 4-H Club. Then, you can go to the fair every year."

BILLY

How old are you, Miss Vanderhoff?

MISS VANDERHOFF

Why must you know that, Billy?

BILLY

Never mind.

MISS VANDERHOFF

I don't especially mind telling you, no: I'm 59 years old. But I don't see what that's got to do with our assignment.

BILLY

When's your birthday?

ALICIA

Yeah, Miss V, what sign were you born under?

MISS VANDERHOFF

(The following is both to STILES and to the class)

I do not believe in astrology.

ALICIA

Why not?

MISS VANDERHOFF

You kids today tend to be very superstitious. Of course, you've had little science and are amazingly ignorant, so that's your excuse, but it's your parents who promote this.

BILLY

Hey, now, now don't be dissing our parents.

MISS VANDERHOFF

I'm not talking about your parents, Billy. I'm speaking of the kind of people who read magazines at grocery store counters. Women who dream of being kidnapped and sexually abused by aliens, or fantasize shamelessly about going off with Elvis Presley in a camper trailer truck.

(The kids get a kick out of this, and MISS VANDERHOFF warms up)

MISS VANDERHOFF (cont'd)

The 4-H club. Do you know, I did join after all, and when I was thirteen I got a little pet goat, which my mother helped me to raise. But one night after supper my father sent me out to kill my goat because it had gotten a terrible case of worms and had stopped eating. Daddy said, "You love it, so you kill it." And, I did. So you beware.

LAFAYETTE

(Suddenly awkwardly accusing)

Least you had a daddy.

MISS VANDERHOFF

How right you are. Nostalgia has no place here.

(A brief pause)

So it's decided? A's for those who hand in their homework, F's for those who do not. Now, I've brought you some compositions to use as models.

ALICIA

You mean to copy?

MISS VANDERHOFF

Not to copy.

BILLY

Whose are they?

MISS VANDERHOFF

They're from the Vanderhoff archives.

LAFAYETTE

They written on parchment?

MISS VANDERHOFF

Wit, too? Lafayette, you're just full of surprises.

(Hands the papers to LAURIE)

Would you, Laurie?

(To class:)

Remember: we are interested in sharing one day, one significant day, in our lives. In fact, I encourage you to use Solzhenitsyn's title. Simply replace Ivan Denisovich with your own names. Now, I think everyone here understands the assignment. Read these essays out loud for everyone to hear, then we can talk about them.

LAFAYETTE

(To ALICIA:)

Hey, what's with the shorts? Aren't you cold?

ALICIA

No.

BILLY

Yeah, I can see your veins.

ALICIA

You can not.

BILLY

That's gross.

LAFAYETTE

Hey, darling, you sure you're warm enough?

ALICIA

Shut up. I can wear shorts if I want to.

LAURIE

Miss V, the Principal said girls can't wear shorts. You're supposed to send her to the auditorium.

LAFAYETTE

Hey, Spellcheck, why don't you shut up?

MISS VANDERHOFF

Lafayette, that's enough out of you.

LAFAYETTE

Man, I hate that.

(To LAURIE:)

Why you gotta snitch?

LAURIE

I'm just telling you the rules.

ALICIA

I walked right in front of the Principal, and he didn't say nothing.

MISS VANDERHOFF

It's just another one of our many unenforced rules. But thank you, Laurie, for pointing it out. Now, let's get back on task, shall we?

LAFAYETTE

Girl: your legs look like they're made outta blue cheese.

ALICIA

Shut up.
please...!

MISS VANDERHOFF

Lafayette, will you

LAFAYETTE

Can I have a bite?

ALICIA

Tell him to leave me alone.

MISS VANDERHOFF

All right, now, that's enough.

LAFAYETTE

I just said it too cold to be wearing shorts.

ALICIA

Then why don't you go back to the jungle?

MISS VANDERHOFF

ALICIA! LAFAYETTE! NOT IN MY CLASSROOM WILL YOU TALK LIKE THAT! Now apologize. Both of you.

ALICIA

Not to him.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Oh, yes. Oh, yes, you will. And to me, and to the rest of the class.

ALICIA

Sorry.

(MISS VANDERHOFF looks at LAFAYETTE; there is a long silence)

MISS VANDERHOFF

I'm waiting.

LAFAYETTE

What for? I didn't do nothing to you.

(MISS VANDERHOFF stares at LAFAYETTE)

LAFAYETTE (cont'd)

What you looking at?

MISS VANDERHOFF

Perhaps I didn't make myself clear. I said I want to hear an apology.

LAFAYETTE

All right, then.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Is that your apology?

LAFAYETTE

Yeah.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Splendid. Now, I want you to evaluate the essays, just as I would.

LAURIE

You mean grade them?

MISS VANDERHOFF

I'm going to give you a scoring sheet, an evaluation rubric which explains how to assign points. We'll add up the points, and identify the best writing samples. How's that sound?

(MR. STILES steps forward)

STILES

You work well with the kids. And they respond. What's missing?

ALICIA

Can we start?

MISS VANDERHOFF

Now, you know my policy: I won't bother you...

ALL

"...if you don't bother me."

(The students work on in silence)

MISS VANDERHOFF

(To MR. STILES:)

People often say what a joy it must be to work with children. It can be. It can be, but the love affair of the American people with children is clearly proof of our decline. I endure them, with the hope that one day they will grow into people of substance. This is possible. Unlikely, but there is always that hope, especially when the children have come to you prepared to be educated.

STILES

You've had a rough year. And, you're right, students have changed.

MISS VANDERHOFF

They have not. I never said that. I don't believe it. We have changed. The adults, not the kids. It's all about appeasement, giving in. Where's the leadership?

ALICIA

Let's take turns.

MR. STILES

Of course, they've changed. Look what they have to face: broken homes, the violence. Well, I don't have to tell you.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Don't tell me.

(Students read from handouts, as indicated by quotation marks)

BILLY

"My friend Dewey's great grandmother is 97 years old. I know her only as Granny." BEEEP.

ALICIA

"I met this guy back in '93 at Wilson High School."

BILLY

Aaaahhh. Tramp.

LAURIE

"Well, I think money can do all sorts of things, but love can, too."

BILLY

(To LAFAYETTE:)

Your turn.

LAFAYETTE

I'm the judge, man. I'm scoring this shit.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Lafayette, everybody reads. You can be the judge when you work on the rubrics.

LAFAYETTE

(Expecting her to refuse)

Well, are you going to give me a pencil?

MISS VANDERHOFF

Of course.

(SHE hands him a pencil)

I'm worried about the students who don't want a pencil.

(LAFAYETTE doesn't seem to know what to make of this)

MISS VANDERHOFF (cont'd)

Think about it.

LAFAYETTE

(Reading now from the sample essay)

"He was a kid that used to hang around the same street that I used to. I met him over at his brother's. They weren't gang members. They were just average kids. The kid, well, my friend - he was a cool guy. We used to share the same locker."

MR. STILES

Aren't the kids supposed to bring their own supplies?

MISS VANDERHOFF

You've never taught, have you?

LAFAYETTE

(To LAURIE:)

What are you looking at?

LAURIE

"But I think it matters what kind of love you are talking about."

ALICIA

"God, I'll never forget that first day I signed in for my classes. It was crowded, telephones ringing, people yelling. As soon as I got my schedule I got lost trying to find my first period class."

BILLY

"Granny has short white hair, and her skin is very light. She is about 5 feet, 2 inches and thin. She wears glasses and has a hearing aid. She can still walk with the help of her walker. She always wears a nightgown." And no underwear.

ALICIA

You are gross.

MISS VANDERHOFF

(To LAURIE:)

Laurie, aren't you next?

LAURIE

"Money makes a lot of people happy. But if money can buy you love, it is not real love. It's fake love that is in love with your money and not with you." Miss V, I don't think that fits the assignment.

ALICIA

You just don't like romance.

LAURIE

That's not true.

ALICIA

I've never seen you with a boyfriend.

BILLY

Maybe she doesn't like boys.

LAFAYETTE

Shut up, man.

MISS VANDERHOFF

What am I hearing? I don't like what I'm hearing.

LAFAYETTE

"It was a Saturday evening in April."

MISS VANDERHOFF

When we did our jobs, there was no violence.

MR. STILES

What do they fight about?

MISS VANDERHOFF

Don't you know anything about kids? All right, I'll tell you. Justice.

(ALICIA begins applying eye makeup)

LAFAYETTE

"He came out through an alley and he was kicking back in the street with my friend Robert and some other friends, when some guys came out from the alley. They started shooting. Robert got shot in the hand, and my friend Michael got shot in the stomach, but he was still alive when he got to the hospital. But he didn't make it."

MISS VANDERHOFF

Children believe in it. They demand it. But we've given up punishment. The kids yell, "teacher, teacher," and we stand around shrugging our shoulders. Nothing is ever settled. We don't take sides. It's every man for himself.

MR. STILES

You're talking about corporal punishment?

MISS VANDERHOFF

Not necessarily.

MR. STILES

Because with the lawyers now, that's out of the question. Things are not that simple. And we didn't have gangs...

MISS VANDERHOFF

The gangs promise what schools once provided: authority, hierarchy, discipline, punishment. It's always the weak who join first. The cry-babies. Being on their own is scarier than getting shot at.

MR. STILES

I never heard that before. Look: I know what a hard assignment you've had.

MISS VANDERHOFF

And how would you know that?

MR. STILES

There on the front lines. We know what you're up against.

MISS VANDERHOFF

We?

MR. STILES

Administration. Dr. Moore's just returned from Washington.

MISS VANDERHOFF

And what was this year's topic? "Adolescent Hormones and Why Our Hands Are Tied."

MR. STILES

Actually...

MISS VANDERHOFF

Or was the Superintendent picking up another fake degree.

MR. STILES

Really? Dr. Moore is a highly educated...

MISS VANDERHOFF

...I appreciate your effort to draw me out. I really do, but what's the point? You have a shortage of teachers, but what am I? A child abuser? I demand homework. Am I mean? I will not permit the boys to slouch. Or to wear hats in the classroom.

(Suddenly addressing ALICIA:)

Put that away now, sweetheart. You'll ruin your complexion.

(ALICIA puts her compact into her bag. Now to STILES:)

And no eating! They carry popsicles in their pockets to eat in class. Potato chips, cans of soda, garlic pickles: they think they're at the county fair. There are no rules. It's a daily battle. And who do you think is the bad guy? No, no: this is - what? - humiliating.

ALICIA

"Then he asked me the big question."

LAFAYETTE

Do you want to fuck me?

MISS VANDERHOFF

Lafayette, that's enough of that. Now you are beginning to ruffle my feathers.

LAFAYETTE

What'd I do?

MISS VANDERHOFF

You just used an obscenity.

LAFAYETTE

That's not an obscenity. That's a philosophy. That's my philosophy.

MISS VANDERHOFF

I would change my philosophy, young man, before someone calls your house.

LAFAYETTE

That's a conspiracy.

BILLY

You really got feathers?

MISS VANDERHOFF

I'd like to get back to our lesson.

BILLY

Where are they?

MISS VANDERHOFF

You are being rude, Billy.

BILLY

Couldn't you show them to us? I want to see if they are gray, too.

MISS VANDERHOFF

That's it. I've asked you nicely. Now get out. Go to the Dean's office.

(BILLY moves with insolent sloth)

MISS VANDERHOFF (cont'd)
WILL YOU GO, PLEASE?
(BILLY slams the door as he exits)

LAFAYETTE
Miss V, you oughtn't to yell like that. You gonna give yourself a heart attack.

MISS VANDERHOFF
(Ever so sweet)
Shall we continue? I believe it's your turn, Alicia.

MR. STILES
Some of us take things too seriously.

MISS VANDERHOFF
Do we?

MR. STILES
I sympathize with you, I really do, but why are you angry, and why so personal? Do you blame the Superintendent for what's happening in our society? Can he change divorce rates? Is he responsible for teenage pregnancy?

MISS VANDERHOFF
It's as if a surgeon had found a burnt-out light bulb in the operating room, and complained to the hospital administrator, who tells him to do the best he can without. You know; "Be flexible! Do your cutting in the dark."

ALICIA
"During lunch he looked for me and he found me. He asked, 'Could I sit with you?' And I said sure. Then we talked and talked. I said, 'Do you remember the question you asked me?'"

MISS VANDERHOFF
We are expected to teach kids on their own terms, and look how many are willing to do it.

ALICIA
He said, 'of course.' 'Well, I do want to be your girlfriend." He hugged me and jumped all over the place. So from that moment on, we went out together. I mean, I

didn't know there was love at first sight 'til I met
him."

BETTERLAND

I-2-35

(SHE savors the moment)
I love that.

LAFAYETTE

You done?
(To LAURIE:)
How long you got?

LAURIE

Mine's finished.

LAFAYETTE

(To MISS VANDERHOFF:)
Five's perfect, right?
(Then to ALICIA:)
Okay, missy, you got yourself a four.

ALICIA

Why?

LAFAYETTE

Let's move on.

ALICIA

It's all about one day. It's a one day love affair.

LAFAYETTE

Look at this here rubric. What does it say?

ALICIA

Where?

LAFAYETTE

Five. You wanna give it a five, right? It say:
"Significant Event." There ain't nothing significant
about no little love peck in the hallway.

ALICIA

It was significant to her.

LAFAYETTE

She ain't the judge.

ALICIA

Whatever.

LAFAYETTE

Naw. You gonna tell me that significant loving? You call that little hand holding shit, love?

ALICIA

It's a romance. She wrote about how she feels. Maybe it was her first time.

LAURIE

I don't think it is about love. I think it's about happiness.

LAFAYETTE

(Spoken in real wonder)

Happiness? What's that?

LAURIE

The whole thing tells about how surprised she is that anyone would pay attention to her. She's lonely. She could even be sad, like maybe her friends always dumped her whenever they got asked out by a boy. And then in class when that guy whispers to her and wants to know her name, I mean she was just too shocked to answer. I'm sure that happened to her before, but she was shy, and when she didn't say nothing, the boys called her conceited. But then when he pursues her, and he's gentle, and he treats her right, she is overcome with joy.

LAFAYETTE

It's a fairy tale.

ALICIA

No. I think it's real, even if it never happened...

LAFAYETTE

What you mean, "it real, but it never happened"?

ALICIA

To one of us. If you'd let me finish. Even if it never happened to one of us, it could still be real. Isn't that possible?

LAFAYETTE

How should I know?

ALICIA

But if it did, I'm just saying, it would be special.

LAFAYETTE

(Unable to come up with an argument)

Yeah.

ALICIA

(SHE looks straight into LAFAYETTE'S eyes)

I think it'd be significant.

LAFAYETTE

(Not sure what HE'S agreeing to)

Yeah.

ALICIA

So it gets a five.

(Their eyes remain locked)

END OF SCENE

Scene 3

Setting: MISS VANDERHOFF's classroom. A few days later.

At Rise: MISS VANDERHOFF is leading class. All students are present.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Well done. Now, first of all, what in the world is he doing with his food? All this "nibbling," and "turning," and "rolling"....Why not wolf it all down the way you kids do? I thought he was hungry? Alicia?

ALICIA

I don't know.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Laurie?

(LAURIE shrugs her shoulders)

MISS VANDERHOFF (cont'd)

Yes, Billy?

BILLY

He's a sorry dude, that's all I got to say.

MISS VANDERHOFF

He is a sorry dude, as you put it so eloquently, Billy, but in what ways specifically does he demonstrate his misfortunes? How does this scene illustrate your observation?

BILLY

He's getting all excited about some soggy-ass crumbs.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Go on.

BILLY

When my cereal gets soggy, I throw it out.

MISS VANDERHOFF

And then what do you do?

BILLY

Get me some more.

MISS VANDERHOFF

And if there was no more? What then, Billy? What would you do?

BILLY

Swipe my little brother's, what else?

MISS VANDERHOFF

There's always more where that came from, isn't there? That, that reality of abundance limits our imagination, don't you think, Billy? It's nearly impossible for us to grasp how those tiny morsels, soggy as they are, perform the miracle of introducing this pitiful man to the divine, transport this little man's damaged psyche into a state of ecstasy. Can one know love without hunger?

(MISS VANDERHOFF remains still, as though transported into her own little world)

BILLY

What?

ALICIA

Miss Van.

BILLY

She's spaced.

MISS VANDERHOFF

(Snapping out of it)

And how does Shukhov feel about his assignment?

ALICIA

Well, it could be worse, and he's inside at least.

LAURIE

He'd like to be near that fire.

BILLY

He had to sit over there in the corner.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Why was that?

BILLY

Yeah, 'cause those other guys are hogging it all for themselves.

MISS VANDERHOFF

They are hogging it all for themselves. What "it," Billy? What do you mean by "hogging it"? No, no, this is not a test. I just want to know what you meant. Are they actually hogging the fire? Would they like to carry it off somewhere, steal it - the fire?

ALICIA

They are huddling around the fire.

LAURIE

They didn't want to make room. They don't want to share.

MISS VANDERHOFF

After all, there's only so much, right? If they let Shukhov in, then each one of them would be that much colder. Isn't that right? They don't have enough to go around.

BILLY

Right! Every man for hisself.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Beautifully put, Billy. Every man for himself.

ALICIA

I don't think so.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Go ahead, Alicia.

ALICIA

If they were together, they'd be warmer. When you stand around together, kinda touching but not really, it'd be warmer than standing by yourself. Everybody knows that. And, anyway, even if each one of them took away some of the fire, it'd probably go out, and then they'd just freeze.

MISS VANDERHOFF

"And then they'd freeze." That's a hard reading of the situation, Alicia. A bleak vision. Is it yours, or the author's, or both? Anyone? Do we agree? Would the authorities allow the men to perish?

BILLY

Dog eat dog. You bet.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Textual evidence. Can you find a passage to support your position, Billy?

BILLY

(HE flips through his book)

Watch!

MISS VANDERHOFF

The authorities are heartless. Do we all agree? Are there no instances of mercy, of compassion, even of...well, let's leave it at that. While you, Billy, are looking for proof of Shukhov's inhabiting a dog-eat-dog world, is there anyone who can find an alternative vision?

BILLY

Wait! I got it.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Let's hear it.

BILLY

"Just look at how they mop..."

MISS VANDERHOFF

Page?

BILLY

Seven.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Good. Who's speaking?

BILLY

Uh, the guard?

MISS VANDERHOFF

I think he is called the Warder. Go on.

BILLY

"Just look at how they mop.... The bastards can't do anything and don't want to either. They're not worth the bread we give 'em. They ought to get shit instead."

(Brief silence)

LAFAYETTE

That's cold.

(His intensity captures everyone's attention)

He saying them prisoners gotta eat shit?

MISS VANDERHOFF

Yes, that's exactly what he says.

LAFAYETTE

That's cold.

BILLY

That real, or what?

MISS VANDERHOFF

It's about as real as you can get.

LAFAYETTE

I wouldn't do no time up in there.

BILLY

Man! I'd knock that sucker out.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Would you, Billy? Regardless of the consequences?

BILLY

Hell yeah.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Even knowing that certain death would follow?

BILLY

What do you mean?

MISS VANDERHOFF

Remember: Shukhov's been threatened with three days in solitary...

LAFAYETTE

That the tank, huh?

MISS VANDERHOFF

...confinement. Yes. And that was just for over-sleeping.

LAFAYETTE

They put you up in there for breaking the rule. You can't talk or nothing, or they come in there and kick your butt. I been up in there.

BILLY

In JD?

LAFAYETTE

Uh-huh. They put your ass in the hole. That's what they call it up in there.

MISS VANDERHOFF

JD?

BILLY

Juvie. Huh, Lafayette?

MISS VANDERHOFF

How long were you...

LAFAYETTE

In camp?

MISS VANDERHOFF

In camp? Yes, in camp.

LAFAYETTE

About eighteen months.

ALICIA

Weren't you frightened?

BILLY

Only if he dropped the soap.

LAFAYETTE

Shut up.

MISS VANDERHOFF

What's that?

BILLY

(Wanting to explain)

See...

(Changes his mind)

Naw.

LAFAYETTE

It's all right up in there. Got your homeys, see, and it's all right.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Did you eat? The food must have been awful.

LAFAYETTE

Naw. See, it ain't like that, you know. We had us a steak on Sunday.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Putting a young boy like you in jail?

(SHE goes to LAFAYETTE)

So you had school...there?

LAFAYETTE

Yeeah. Kinda, but it's not like it is here. They don't play that. You be talking and shit and, man, they make you get down on the floor, and you got to stay down there 'til they're ready to let you up. You see what I'm saying? Sometime I've seen the whole class down there including the teacher, 'cause they don't make you do nothing they can't do theirselves.

BILLY

Hey, man, what'd you do anyway? You smoking weed?

LAFAYETTE

Naw. On account of my homey. Weed, shit.

MISS VANDERHOFF

I don't follow that. What did you do?

LAFAYETTE

Jacked one of them Camero Super Sport.

BILLY

He got Lo-jacked!

LAFAYETTE

Bam! They were all over us in less than fifteen minutes.
(BILLY screams with laughter.)

MISS VANDERHOFF

You stole a car? Why?

LAFAYETTE

And the police...he pulls out his gun and sticks it right to my head. "GET OUTTA THAT CAR, NIGGER! Or I'LL BLOW YOUR FUCKIN' HEAD OFF."

(Very quiet now)

They shouldn't do people like that.

MISS VANDERHOFF

But you did actually steal the car?

LAFAYETTE

Yeah. I mean, naw. Huh?

MISS VANDERHOFF

What were you doing? Did you know what you were doing?

LAFAYETTE

See: he couldn't do no more time.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Who? Who couldn't?

LAFAYETTE

My homey.

MISS VANDERHOFF

So it was he who stole the car? Where were you?

LAFAYETTE

He was on probation, so he gave me the keys.

MISS VANDERHOFF

You took the keys? And they arrested you? You took the blame for your friend? Why didn't you tell the police? I suppose one can admire your loyalty, Lafayette, but.... Didn't you say anything? Why didn't you tell the police?

BILLY

(Light-hearted; a joke)

'Cause he's stupid.

(LAFAYETTE springs up, grabbing BILLY by the neck.)

MISS VANDERHOFF

Boys! Lafayette! Let go right this minute. You are choking him! Lafayette, that is not necessary. Let me take care of Billy. Come on: take your hands off him. They'll arrest you! Let go of him, Lafayette, please now.

(LAFAYETTE turns BILLY loose)

MISS VANDERHOFF (cont'd)

There! Billy, are you all right?

BILLY

(HE struggles to catch his breath, and to regain his composure)

I guess.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Go sit down, Lafayette.

BILLY

Punk.

LAFAYETTE

I'll kick your ass.

MISS VANDERHOFF

I thought I told you to sit down.

LAFAYETTE

I don't take that off no one.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Don't you?

LAFAYETTE

(To BILLY:)

Man, you are lucky 'cause...

MISS VANDERHOFF

I cannot and do not condone violence, Lafayette. I'm going to have to send you out.

LAFAYETTE

Naw, don't.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Don't? I'll have you dragged out.

LAFAYETTE

I can't. I can't get in no trouble, the Judge said, or I'll have to go back to camp.

MISS VANDERHOFF

You should have thought of that. Adios.

LAFAYETTE

He'll put me back in there. I'M TELLING YOU, I CAN'T.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Lower your voice.

LAFAYETTE

I can't go back. I can't. I DON'T WANNA GO BACK TO THAT SHIT-HOLE.

MISS VANDERHOFF

AND I DON'T CARE TO LISTEN TO THAT MOUTH.

(Motions LAURIE AND ALICIA out)

Thank you, ladies.

LAFAYETTE

Please. Don't.

BILLY

I oughta press charges. That idiot tried to kill me.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Yes, Billy, step over there, please.

(To LAFAYETTE:)

I'll see you in the main office.

LAFAYETTE

I'll kill myself.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Don't be ridiculous.

LAFAYETTE

(Wild eyed)
They'll kick me out!

MISS VANDERHOFF

Hold...on...there.

LAFAYETTE

They'll arrest me. They'll send me back.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Be still.

LAFAYETTE

(Pleading)
Don't let them. Please. Please, lady.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Billy, would you excuse us, please?

BILLY

That's cool.

LAFAYETTE

I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

MISS VANDERHOFF

All right.

LAFAYETTE

Please, lady.

MISS VANDERHOFF

I won't. I won't let them send you back. You're safe now. You're safe here.

END OF SCENE

Scene 4

Setting: Later that month. Changes have been made to the bulletin boards. Student work is on display, as well as a few prominent posters.

At Rise: MISS VANDERHOFF stands before the class.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Then, why don't you start us off?

ALICIA

"The grounds for my arrest were passages extracted by the censor from my correspondence with a school friend during 1944-45, mainly certain disrespectful remarks about Stalin, although we referred to him by a pseudonym."

MISS VANDERHOFF

We're all right? Everybody understands the word pseudonym?

LAURIE

Like a fake name?

MISS VANDERHOFF

You are a living dictionary. So they wrote about Stalin, but were careful not to use his actual name.

LAURIE

Because they didn't want to get caught.

BILLY

Right. Right.

MISS VANDERHOFF

So we can safely say that he knew the law. Now, are we at all in doubt as to his guilt? Were his actions illegal?

BILLY

Everything's legal until you get caught.

MISS VANDERHOFF

I like that. Who said that?

BILLY

My brother.

MISS VANDERHOFF

All right. So we become subject to the domination of legality. And what of morality? Can we judge Soviet law? Can we say that it is wrong, morally, humanly? Can we say it distorts life? Anyone? Lafayette? You're being rather quiet today. Do you have your work?

(LAFAYETTE holds up his paper)

MISS VANDERHOFF

You must have an opinion. What do you think? Is he guilty or innocent?

LAFAYETTE

I don't know.

MISS VANDERHOFF

I'm sure you must think something.

LAFAYETTE

(Pleasant)

Naw.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Did you get enough sleep last night?

LAFAYETTE

Yeah.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Have you been listening?

LAFAYETTE

Yeah.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Well?

(Silence)

MISS VANDERHOFF (cont'd)

Lafayette, can't you see I'm trying to get you to participate? We're having a discussion, it's part of class, and I expect you to do your share. Part of your grade is based on participation.

LAFAYETTE

I know.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Well then?

LAFAYETTE

Why you picking on me? Naw. You're messing with our heads.

MISS VANDERHOFF

What in the world are you talking about now?

LAFAYETTE

What's it for? My opinion don't matter none. Finish school, and get you a job and all, who gonna care about what you think? First day, they go: "Shut up. Who asked you?"

BILLY

Right.

LAFAYETTE

But now teacher be at you: "Let's share, boys and girls. Who first?"

MISS VANDERHOFF

All right, Lafayette.

LAFAYETTE

You supposed to "read between the lines." How you gonna read between the lines of 9 to 5? You see what I'm saying? You always talking about critical thinking. What you gonna criticize? Your boss? Watch him criticize your ass out of a paycheck.

ALICIA

That's true.

LAFAYETTE

And it ain't no racism neither. Everybody goes into the meat grinder. Mr. Sullivan -- he all right -- but he be telling about your civil rights, how you gonna call the police if you don't get some job, like the Lone Ranger and Tonto gonna ride in and scalp his discriminating ass.

MISS VANDERHOFF

What exactly is your point, Lafayette? Are you proposing that we give up trying to get you to think?

LAFAYETTE

I'm saying, run your mouth, you in deep shit. That goes for the street, in here, the joint - and that's for sure - and most everywhere. You oughta give us A's for keepin' our traps shut. Am I wrong? You got to think in school, but try it out there, you're through.

MISS VANDERHOFF

I never thought of that. I've been trying to get you to use your imaginations.

LAFAYETTE

Imagination? Like you gonna arrive to work whenever you feel like it. You better imagine your ass on the street. They don't play. Be messing around with that Big Mac recipe, you know, adding some mustard and shit, leaving out the secret sauce, Old Ronald'll come out and stomp your imaginative ass.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Thank you, Lafayette.

LAFAYETTE

I'm serious. I'm serious.

MISS VANDERHOFF

I think we get the picture.

LAFAYETTE

You all be telling stuff, but it don't make no sense.

(Female teacher's voice)

"Share your feelings. I want to hear your honest opinion. Let's use our imaginations!" You start talking like that, they gonna figure you someone's bitch, and your name's Jill.

BILLY

He's right! It's all bullshit!

MISS VANDERHOFF

Billy! Let's keep our voices down. And that language...both of you.

(Brief pause)

But you have a point, Lafayette.

LAFAYETTE

Forget it.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Maybe you're right. We probably haven't done a very good job of preparing you for this world. But I can say in my own defense that nobody really planned for you to have to lead such lives. I know I didn't.

(brief pause; broadly, to include STILES:)

How does one educate a child for a spot on the treadmill? How does one teach stamina? I don't know how to teach you to work endlessly -- mindlessly -- for something as intangible as something called a better life.

BILLY

My dad says life is a shit sandwich.

(Everyone cracks up, including MISS VANDERHOFF)

MISS VANDERHOFF

Isn't that lovely imagery? Thank you, Billy.

BILLY

You're welcome.

LAFAYETTE

What do you want me to be?

MISS VANDERHOFF

An orchid.

MR. STILES

An orchid?

LAFAYETTE

A what?

MISS VANDERHOFF

An orchid. I said I want you to be an orchid.

MR. STILES

I don't understand what you mean.

LAFAYETTE

They don't grow nothing like that around here. I'd have to move to Hawaii or Tahiti, or some such place.

MISS VANDERHOFF

I don't think that's true. I've seen them cultivated in practically barren ground. You'd be surprised. I once had a teacher friend who found a way to raise orchids in her pasture.

MR. STILES

This is your philosophy of education?

BILLY

She come to school smelling like cow shit?

MISS VANDERHOFF

I've forgotten. It's been a long time, Billy, many years ago.

MR. STILES

No reputable department of education teaches that.

BILLY

So how do you remember how to raise orchids?

MISS VANDERHOFF

I'm not sure that I do.

(Dismissal bell sounds; STUDENTS pack up to leave)

MISS VANDERHOFF (con't)

All right, you nuts, go home.

LAURIE

What about homework.

MISS VANDERHOFF

No homework.

BILLY

None?

ALICIA

That's a first.

BILLY

What's the catch?

MISS VANDERHOFF

We'll call it an experiment. One must remain on the cutting edge.

BILLY

Let's go before she changes her mind.
(STUDENTS scatter)

MISS VANDERHOFF

Be good.
(MISS VANDERHOFF takes a moment to collect her thoughts)

LAFAYETTE

(Reentering the room, He approaches MISS VANDERHOFF)

Can I get one of them books?

MISS VANDERHOFF

What?

LAFAYETTE

I wanted to see that book.

MISS VANDERHOFF

I don't understand what you mean by see it?

LAFAYETTE

I want to take it with me. Take it my house.

MISS VANDERHOFF

I won't say no, Lafayette, but you know I prefer to keep the books here. That way you can't say you forgot it at home, or left it in your locker.

(Seeing his disappointment)

What exactly did you have in mind?

LAFAYETTE

My auntie, I told her about it.

MISS VANDERHOFF

About the Solzhenitsyn?

LAFAYETTE

Yeah, about the story. She wants to read it.

MISS VANDERHOFF

(SHE lights up as if presented with a bouquet of fresh daisies)

That's wonderful.

LAFAYETTE

She asked me to get her a copy, but I forgot.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Oh, I'm so glad.

LAFAYETTE

She sent me back to get it.

MISS VANDERHOFF

She didn't? You know, I really do want you to keep your copy here. But I happen to have a few extra copies.

(Opening a cabinet)

Here -- why don't you take this, and give it to your aunt. She can keep it for as long as she likes.

LAFAYETTE

All right.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Oh, and Lafayette, I've been meaning to ask. There's a position available in the English department for a student service worker. I thought you might be interested.

LAFAYETTE

(Quick and intense)

Don't be doing me any favors.

(Surprised at himself; now more calmly)

I don't like people trying to help me. I can take care of myself.

MISS VANDERHOFF

No, no. It's nothing like that. It's for me. I need the help. I need someone reliable. Someone smart. You would be doing me a favor. You would be helping me.

END OF ACT ONE

ACT II

Scene 1

Setting: MISS VANDERHOFF's classroom.
Several days later.

At Rise: Students have been reading from "One Day In The Life Of Ivan Denisovich."

LAURIE

The new history teacher says Shakespeare didn't really exist, and someone else wrote "Romeo and Juliet." He says there is no Shakespeare, and you should be teaching about the real Shakespeare.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Maybe he should stick to his own subject which, from the sound of it, consists of teaching you the cultural geography of the Bermuda Triangle.

LAURIE

Yeah, but if he's right and Shakespeare really didn't exist, who was it who wrote those plays?

MISS VANDERHOFF

We're going to get into to all that soon enough, Laurie. We'll discuss it at greater length next semester. All righty? We mustn't get side-tracked. We have a presentation from Alicia today...

(ALICIA nods in agreement)

Good. We're looking forward to that.

LAURIE

But, Miss V, when is Mr. Sullivan coming back? He never gave us back our papers.

BILLY

He's history! Hey, that's pretty funny, huhn? The history teacher is history.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Billy, do you mind?

BILLY

Hey, he smacked that kid. Teachers can't hit the students.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Are you a student?

(Loud static from the PA can be heard)

Hark!

OFFICE MANAGER'S VOICE

(Over the loudspeaker)

Please excuse the interruption. Would the driver of a blue Honda, license number CBSE-367 please report to the Main Office? The driver of a blue Honda in the north parking lot, you are in the Principal's parking space. Please come to the Main Office immediately, or your car will be towed.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Don't all run out at once!

(Slight pause; MISS VANDERHOFF surveys the room)

Where were we? Who was reading?

(LAFAYETTE raises his hand)

MISS VANDERHOFF

Yes, of course! You read so well. You must have had a solid foundation.

(Silence, as LAFAYETTE hangs his head)

MISS VANDERHOFF (cont'd)

Well, if you don't want to say...

LAFAYETTE

My mamma.

(BILLY offers a cynical chuckle)

MISS VANDERHOFF

Good for her.

LAFAYETTE

She used to read to us, you know, when we were kids.

MISS VANDERHOFF

How nice. Did you have a favorite?

LAFAYETTE

Yeeah.

MISS VANDERHOFF

What was it?

LAFAYETTE

This children's book, "When We Were Young," something like that.

MISS VANDERHOFF

(Recites)

"Where am I going? I don't quite know./Down to the stream where the king-cups grow--/Up on the hill where the pine-trees blow--/Anywhere, anywhere. I don't know."

LAFAYETTE

Yeeah. Who wrote that?

MISS VANDERHOFF

"When We Were Very Young." A. A. Milne. He's always been a favorite of mine, too. A very different world from what we have on our minds today. Now, are there any comments? Questions?

LAURIE

What's that kasha stuff?

MISS VANDERHOFF

It's a kind of Russian oatmeal, a cereal, but the grains are much rougher than what we're used to having. I suspect it's rather like mush. But, interesting and exotic as that may be, I'd like to draw your attention to two other words in that passage, which I like because they are so descriptive. The first is hunks, as in "great hunks of meat," and the other is "swilled." There is an entire world captured in these words. Now I have some worksheets for you...

(Begins handing out papers)

And...if you would...Laurie, would you pass these?

LAURIE

I guess so.

MISS VANDERHOFF

(To LAURIE:)

Give one of these to each...

(To class:)

I'm sorry, but I didn't have time to collate them, so you'll just have to put them in order as you get them. You'll see they're numbered, all right?

BILLY

Hey, I got two of number six.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Let's not make a big production.

ALICIA

Do you got a stapler?

MISS VANDERHOFF

Yes.

(Hands the stapler to ALICIA)

Pass it around, will you?

ALICIA

It's out, Miss V. See? No more staples.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Phooey. Um, Lafayette? Would you go...?

(Thinks better of it)

BILLY

Oh, oh! Let me!

(Rises from his seat)

You always send him.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Do I? That's all right, then. I'll run down to the office. I think I can trust you. See if you can do the first ten words.

(SHE leaves)

ALICIA

How many papers are there?

BILLY

Beats me.

LAURIE

Ten.

ALICIA

Ten? I've got nine. Where's number eight?

BILLY

In Miss V's cunt.

LAFAYETTE

(To LAURIE:)

Hey, doll, let me see your paper.

LAURIE

No.

LAFAYETTE

Come on, now. Thought we're a team? Just asked for one lousy word.

LAURIE

You're supposed to be doing your own work.

(With great hesitation, SHE turns to LAFAYETTE)

All right, one word. What is it?

LAFAYETTE

You know how to spell tits? I know it got two "T's." There's one here...

(Pointing at LAURIE)

...and one there, but what comes in between?

(ALICIA struggles to contain herself)

BILLY

(Laughing uproariously)

"You know how to spell tits?"

(HE moves next to LAFAYETTE, patting him on the shoulder)

LAFAYETTE

Hey, don't be doing that.

BILLY

I'm cool.

LAFAYETTE

Don't be coming up on me, man.

BILLY

It don't mean nothing.

(Pause)

Hey, I've been wondering. Why'd you take that rap? Is it true they seal your records and shit, so it's the same as you did nothing?

LAFAYETTE

You just do, you know what I'm saying? I'd been spotting wheels for Mr. Raymond since I was twelve. Police come around, you don't know nothing. There be some strange fruit up in them projects, man, some strange fruit.

ALICIA

You weren't afraid, I mean, in camp and all?

LAFAYETTE

They be trying to turn you into something. They want your booty, man, and once they take your manhood, it's gone. But you get yourself some respect, it's all right. You got your homeys.

BILLY

But some of those guys let themselves get choo-chooed, z'it true, man?

LAFAYETTE

Yeah.

BILLY

Damn.

LAFAYETTE

Yeah.

BILLY

What's up with that shit? And you gotta be up in there with a bunch of perverts?

LAFAYETTE

That's just it, they ain't. But they sure as shit wanna turn your ass into one.

BILLY

Never.

LAFAYETTE

You got to punk them, before they punk you. And quick as a motherfucker. You can't be thinking none. You take your time, and pretty soon they gonna come to expect what they took the first time by force. And no one, I mean, no one's gonna lift a finger to save your ass.

BILLY

What about the guards?

LAFAYETTE

You hear what I'm saying?

BILLY

What did you do in there? You bored or what?

LAFAYETTE

Cards and shit. The tube. They show some bad flicks, man.

BILLY

Porno?

LAFAYETTE

Naw, man. None of that. One old guy, he works up in the cafeteria, he let us watch this old shit 'bout Superfly and all them.

BILLY

Oh, yeah?

LAFAYETTE

Nobody messes with him. He's bad. These white punks be trying to catch his ass, see. But, man: kaboom. He killed every last one of them. Kaboom. Not one standing.

(MISS VANDERHOFF reenters)

LAFAYETTE (cont'd)

Every time he got one of them white dudes, man, I'm telling you, it was like mayhem up in there. We were laughing our asses off.

MISS VANDERHOFF

(Cool as a cucumber))

That's not very nice.

LAFAYETTE

Look what you all be doing to us. All them lynchings, church burnings and shit.

MISS VANDERHOFF

I never did that. But I always laugh my ass off when I see it in the movies.

LAFAYETTE

(Class is silent; suddenly LAFAYETTE bursts out laughing)

All right, Miss V, all right now. You crazy.

MISS VANDERHOFF

I believe I am.

LAFAYETTE

Come on, now. Don't be like that, now. Don't leave me hanging.

(LAFAYETTE gives her five)

MISS VANDERHOFF

I hate this.

(SHE reciprocates)

So ridiculous.

LAFAYETTE

All right, Miss V. Miss V.

(Having a little fun)

But how do I know you ain't no KKK? One of them hoods and some goofy sheet. Booooo.

MR. STILES

Why would you leave your class like that? A teacher with your experience, you must have known - you surely realized that you risked...

MISS VANDERHOFF

Yes, yes I suppose I did. Of course, I did, but the kids respond well to being given responsibility. I felt I could trust them.

MR. STILES

But you had a duty to enforce the rules.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Rules? Mr. Stiles, you said you've never taught, but surely -- a man your age -- you haven't been out of school too long to have forgotten. There are no rules.

MR. STILES

I went to Catholic school.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Everything here is organized around enjoyment, but there is no joy. We don't even have a curriculum. Miss Levy prefers women authors, so our students no longer read Wordsworth. Our African-American doesn't like the classics, so we dropped Homer. Which is perfectly all right with me, but what makes anyone think I ever enjoyed teaching the Greeks. I taught them because that's what the children required. That's what we called a curriculum. I never liked Hemingway. I thought him an emotional thug, but I taught him. I've enforced the rules for 37 years.

MR. STILES

Well, then, what happened?

MISS VANDERHOFF

Mr. Stiles, thirty seven years of teaching taught me very little about trust. But, you see, I wanted something new.

(Classroom scene resumes)

Now, let's move on to Alicia. You want to go to the front, dear?

(ALICIA goes to the front and MISS VANDERHOFF gives her center stage)

ALICIA

(Recites from memory)

"The worst day of my life was when I had got pregnant. I wanted to die. I didn't know what to do. I was confused. I cried all the time. I mean, what were my parents going to say? My boyfriend wanted to keep it. We both wanted to keep it, and so we talked it over and we decided to, but without my parents knowing about it. I would of just went to live with him in Arizona, 'cause my uncle lives up there. So it wouldn't of been a problem, but just then my best girlfriend got mad at me. She wanted to get in a fight 'cause she heard rumors I was talking stuff about her, even though I wasn't. And she didn't want to believe me.

One rainy night I was at home and, well, it had stopped raining, and my boyfriend paged me to come over, and he told me he would pick me up walking, 'cause he didn't have his car. So he went to pick me up with his sister and, well, we were passing my girlfriend's house and she was outside with a couple of girls and guys, and she came out and pushed me. Then my boyfriend's sister

ALICIA (cont'd)

pushed her and they started to fight, but my boyfriend stopped them. Then we just left, but before that she told me, 'I'll get you. You better watch yourself.' And a week passed and she seen me walking by myself and she was with another friend and they pushed me and tripped me and I had a miscarriage. But, oh well. It'll all come back on her. That was the worst day of my life."

MISS VANDERHOFF

Is that it?

(Almost to herself)

You don't really have a conclusion, do you? All right, Alicia, thank you. You may sit.

(MISS VANDERHOFF solicits applause)

Very well, ladies and gentlemen. Let's take a moment to score.

BILLY

Aren't you going to give us all A's?

MISS VANDERHOFF

I don't think so.

LAURIE

Last time you gave me a "B." And if it hadn't been for you, I'd have been on the Honor Roll. I could've had straight "A's."

BILLY

Yeah, Miss V.

ALICIA

Couldn't you give us a break? Why not?

MISS VANDERHOFF

In the first place, I don't know anyone here who needs a break. Secondly, to do that would mean that I had lost respect for you but, more importantly, for myself. Now, be sure to fill in your forms, so you will have something to refer to when you come to rank the finalists. Lafayette, then. I believe you're next. Please step to the front.

LAFAYETTE

(Steps to the front of the class)

I've been thinking about this Solzhenitsyn and I went to the library to get some books on him and I've been

LAFAYETTE (cont'd)

reading about him and then I got this book, *The Gulag*, and I'm not finished with it yet, but I read the first two volumes and I started the third, which is the last. But for now I'll stick mainly to "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich," 'cause that's the book everyone's read and knows real good.

BILLY

Time out.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Hold your questions, now.

BILLY

Yeah, but he's not even...

LAURIE

You said it's supposed to be autobiographical.

BILLY

It's gotta be about ourselves.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Yes, that's right.

LAFAYETTE

Why you saying that, man?

MISS VANDERHOFF

Let's not get into that. Judges, you'll just have to score according to our guidelines. Use your own judgement. Let's continue. Lafayette.

LAFAYETTE

I wanna talk about the Gulag and about Solzhenitsyn, 'cause I understand him and I got something to say, and it is autobiographical without being about myself.

MISS VANDERHOFF

I always encourage students to get out of themselves.

LAFAYETTE

See, that's the whole point. That's what the author's saying. In the, you know, in...Ivan Denisovich, now he...he's out there, man, he's out in that ice and snow and they're feeding him fishheads and eyeballs and shit

LAFAYETTE (cont'd)

floating in water and everyone's starving to death - they're starving to death - and they're freezing their asses off, but the whole thing, I mean, the story... the entire story, its message is that it's wonderful to be alive. That's the heart of that book. And that's why he tells it like he does, in one day, one entire day from waking up to getting back into that bed with that measly cover. But the whole thing, the reason it takes place over a single day is that we can see that he made it, he survives. And he's not bitter, he's not even angry, you know, he's grateful, grateful to be alive and he's full of feeling. He's got this miserable life, and there's death all around - but that's true everywhere, right? - but does he hate? No. Not even the guards. Is he willing to lie or to cheat for a better life? No. In fact, he learns to cherish everything, like those lousy morsels of bread. He appreciates life. And he suffers, but he suffers behind the misfortunes of others. He's not glad when someone else gets it in the neck. He's linked up with the whole thing. He knows everyone in the camp like the back of his hand. Like it's home. Now, it could be pretty bad, too, sure. And it gets scary, with all them killings and shootings, and some people are sick and dying and nobody cares, but Solzhenitsyn, he gets off on it. Yeah. He's exhilarated by the horror. No. Not because he's some kind of nut, nothing like that, he's not crazy. He's high 'cause the experience forces him to be a better person. He discovers God, he becomes generous and kind. He learns to nurture his soul, which he'd always neglected before he was arrested. It's like the whole thing sets him straight and teaches him something he never knew before, and he's such a deep thinker, he's blown away by the experience of learning the meaning of life. That's what the book's about. The meaning of life. And that's why I chose him as the subject of my personal essay. I'm interested in that as a subject and I want to explain what's up with Solzhenitsyn. 'Cause I am Ivan Denisovich, and so are you. And I can't see why you got a problem with that.

MISS VANDERHOFF

You can't see why I've got a problem with that?

LAURIE

Miss Vanderhoff?

MISS VANDERHOFF

Yes, Laurie.

LAURIE

You said if we go off topic, it's an automatic zero. It's the same as no topic. No points.

ALICIA

It sounded personal to me.

BILLY

Personal essay can't be about no one famous.

LAFAYETTE

It is personal, fool.

MISS VANDERHOFF

That's enough, Lafayette.

BILLY

Whatcha gonna do?

MISS VANDERHOFF

Sit down, Billy. Look, I can't have you guys going at it. Lafayette, do me a favor, and stand outside for a minute. I'll talk to the class, then I'll talk to you.

LAFAYETTE

Me, go outside? What about him?

MISS VANDERHOFF

It's not a punishment. Just stand outside where I can see you. We'll talk in a minute.

(LAFAYETTE exits to the corridor, out of sight)

MISS VANDERHOFF (cont'd)

All right, class, mark your rubrics according to my instructions.

LAURIE

What do we give him for being off-topic?

BILLY

I vote to fail him.

MISS VANDERHOFF

This is not an election. I will do the grading. Right now your listening skills are what's most important. Please follow the directions, and complete the worksheet.

(Dismissal bell sounds)

When you've finished, you may leave. Billy, Laurie, don't forget to hand in your final drafts.

LAURIE

Does it have to be word-processed for an "A"?

MISS VANDERHOFF

No. It only has to be brilliant. And no special fonts!

BILLY

(Is first to finish)

Catch you later.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Your draft?

BILLY

I left it at home. I'll bring it tomorrow.

(BILLY exits)

MISS VANDERHOFF

You may come in, Lafayette. I'd like to have a word with you.

(LAFAYETTE steps in)

ALICIA

(Hands in her paper; turns to LAFAYETTE:)

Bye.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Good bye, dear. See you tomorrow.

LAURIE

Here you go.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Thank you, honey.

LAFAYETTE

Then, if it's all right, I gotta jam.

MISS VANDERHOFF

I didn't answer your question.

LAFAYETTE

What's that?

MISS VANDERHOFF

You asked if I had a problem with your topic. Don't you want to hear my answer?

LAFAYETTE

Naw, forget it.

MISS VANDERHOFF

What you said today would be impossible to forget.

LAFAYETTE

I can tell you didn't like it. Nobody did.

MISS VANDERHOFF

You're able to understand Solzhenitsyn, but you completely misunderstand me. I don't have a problem with your topic, Lafayette.

LAFAYETTE

You don't?

MISS VANDERHOFF

It's true your recitation has little to do with the assigned topic, but I can recognize quality when I hear it.

LAFAYETTE

You don't mind that I didn't do the assignment? I mean...

MISS VANDERHOFF

What you gave us was better than the assignment. It was excellent. You have, as the poet said, deviated into sense.

LAFAYETTE

Why'd you go and send me out?

MISS VANDERHOFF

Some people believe teaching is about power. Most students do. I often have to do things to maintain that illusion.

LAFAYETTE

What's that supposed to mean?

MISS VANDERHOFF

Your classmates wanted to see you humiliated, not praised. And what I planned to say, I wanted to say in private. Everyone's obsessed with being treated the same. I can see that you've been taught to conceal your intelligence. And your teachers are expected to disguise their appreciation of it.

LAFAYETTE

They pass you along just for coming to class.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Schools no longer function as sanctuaries. There is no discernment, neither passion for discovery, nor love. Real students feel vulnerable. It's easy to misconstrue the special relationship between a real student and a teacher.

LAFAYETTE

At first, I didn't think you liked me.

MISS VANDERHOFF

There wasn't much to like. You were keeping yourself buried deep in the ground, like a bulb. But today you broke the surface.

(Pause)

Thank you.

LAFAYETTE

Why are you thanking me?

MISS VANDERHOFF

I've been wondering, Lafayette... You said that you see yourself as a prisoner like Ivan Denisovich. Do you identify your teachers with the guards?

LAFAYETTE

Yeah. Some of them. Mostly.

MISS VANDERHOFF

What about me?

LAFAYETTE

Yeah, the Warden. No, I'm playing.

MISS VANDERHOFF

I'm going to make a reading list for you. I think you'll like Russian literature.

(SHE sings as she packs her bag)

LAFAYETTE

Solzhenitsyn says that the religious prisoners, like the nuns and the Baptists, were able to survive 'cause they sang a lot. And even though it was against regulations, the guards let them do it.

MISS VANDERHOFF

I'll remember that. I'm fairly certain, though, that singing is still allowed here.

END OF SCENE

Scene 2

Setting: MISS VANDERHOFF's classroom. Days later. Middle of the school day.

At Rise: LAFAYETTE is in the classroom by himself, looking for MISS VANDERHOFF's grade book. BILLY enters.

BILLY

(Enters, carrying books, etc.)

Hey, where's everybody at?

(Silence)

You here alone? Where's Miss V?

(HE walks around)

Miss V leave the door open?

LAFAYETTE

She sent me to get something. She's in the Counselor's Office.

BILLY

(Suspicious)

I can see that.

LAFAYETTE

Maybe she left it in her car.

BILLY

Been here long?

LAFAYETTE

Naw.

(Continues his search)

I'm supposed to get right back to the meeting.

BILLY

What kind of meeting?

LAFAYETTE

Miss V's trying to help me with my credits. They're trying to say I can't graduate.

BILLY

We having class, or what?

LAFAYETTE

I don't know. Meeting just started.
(Giving up his search)
I guess it's in her car.

BILLY

Want some help?

LAFAYETTE

Yeah, sure. You know her little grade book, that extra thing, not her roll book?

BILLY

Her little book? Yeah.

LAFAYETTE

You keep looking for it, and I'll go out to her car.
(HE practically runs out)

BILLY

(HE sits at MISS V's desk, banging paper weight.)

"Attention! Your attention! I want to hear intellectual discourse. No socializing. This is a school after all."
(HE goes to the chalk board and begins to sketch)

LAFAYETTE

(Returning)

What are you doing? Miss V might come in.

BILLY

I don't give a mad fuck.

LAFAYETTE

She deserves some respect. Everyone deserves some respect.

BILLY

She ain't nothing.

LAFAYETTE

So?

BILLY

So, what's going on? The way you been acting.

LAFAYETTE

Who?

BILLY

You and Ol' Vital Titties, man. Miss Vanderhorse. Who else? Why you sucking up to her?

LAFAYETTE

Man, I don't suck up.

BILLY

What'd you get on the mid-term?

LAFAYETTE

What's that got to do with it?

BILLY

Of course, "A." The only "A."

LAFAYETTE

How do you know?

BILLY

Are you crazy? She's announced it to all her classes, like it's some fucking world record, which it practically is.

LAFAYETTE

Oh, yeah? Why are you in my business anyway?

BILLY

As long as someone gets an "A," we can't say her tests are too hard. You make our grades go down, 'cause she doesn't grade on a curve.

LAFAYETTE

That's my fault? Anyway, it was open-book. All you had to do is read.

BILLY

I can't figure you out. They say she's a racist.

LAFAYETTE

Shit. Everyone's racist.

BILLY

She sure likes you.

LAFAYETTE

Miss Van's a teacher. She doesn't like anyone.

BILLY

I'll tell you who else likes you.

LAFAYETTE

If you care so much, why don't you do your work?

BILLY

Forget that. Maybe I can hook you up.

LAFAYETTE

What are you talking about?

BILLY

Her last boyfriend was this black dude named Deon.

LAFAYETTE

Never heard of him. Who are you talking about?

BILLY

Alicia.

LAFAYETTE

Oh yeah?

BILLY

She dumped him 'cause he was messing around.

LAFAYETTE

I thought you used to go out with her.

BILLY

I got cock-blocked, man. I've known her since elementary. Anyways, man, you gotta go for broke. Black guys have a reputation.

LAFAYETTE

What reputation?

BILLY

And I'll tell you something else, girls like guys with a sense of humor. They want someone that could converse with them. I'm just saying, I'd do something. Alicia thinks you're fine.

LAFAYETTE

She said that?

BILLY

Just go up to her. Chicks don't like school-boys. You gotta do something.

LAFAYETTE

She's fine.

BILLY

Hell yeah.

LAFAYETTE

She actually say something?

BILLY

The way you act, some people think, I'm not saying me, but, uh, you're not aggressive enough. Maybe Alicia thinks you're not man enough, or something.

LAFAYETTE

Who said that?

BILLY

Naw, nobody. I'm just saying you gotta make your move.

LAFAYETTE

Alicia. Damn.

END OF SCENE

Scene 3

Setting: MISS VANDERHOFF's classroom. 6am.

At Rise: LAFAYETTE is sitting in the classroom by himself.

ALICIA

(Enters, wearing running clothes. SHE's been working out)

Aren't you sorta young to be the teacher?

LAFAYETTE

Depends on what you want to learn. What did you say your name was?

ALICIA

Alicia Lechuga.

LAFAYETTE

I didn't catch how you say it. It Alicia, like "see ya," or it Alicia, as in "delicious"?

ALICIA

(Getting up to go)

See ya.

LAFAYETTE

Naw. It cool.

ALICIA

What's your problem?

LAFAYETTE

Nothing.

(Pause)

What are you doing here anyways?

ALICIA

Me? I've got practice in 40 minutes. What about you?

LAFAYETTE

My auntie's boyfriend said, "now or never," so... Shit, this place is deserted.

ALICIA

(Catching LAFAYETTE's glare)

They don't open the gym 'til 7. Why you gotta look at me like that?

LAFAYETTE

Oh, yeah? How am I looking?

ALICIA

You better stop.

LAFAYETTE

I seen you.

ALICIA

Seen what?

LAFAYETTE

You know.

ALICIA

No, I don't.

LAFAYETTE

All right, then.

ALICIA

I don't.

LAFAYETTE

Be like that.

ALICIA

Give me a break.

LAFAYETTE

I seen you out there on the field.

ALICIA

Oh, really?

LAFAYETTE

Uh-huhn.

ALICIA

You sure that wasn't Leticia?

LAFAYETTE

Leticia? Shit.

ALICIA

They say you going with her.

LAFAYETTE

I gone with her. Don't mean I'm going.

ALICIA

When's Miss Vanderhoff coming back?

LAFAYETTE

She's on her way to some parent conference. So, what's up?

ALICIA

Other girls are saying stuff.

LAFAYETTE

They always be running their mouths. What you hear?

ALICIA

You're fine and all, but...

LAFAYETTE

Shit.

ALICIA

Some of them afraid of you.

LAFAYETTE

Them? They dream they got something to be afraid of.

ALICIA

Do I...got reason to be afraid?

LAFAYETTE

Yeah.

ALICIA

Yeah?

LAFAYETTE
Naw.
 (Silence)
I'm, uh...

ALICIA
What?

LAFAYETTE
Nothing.

ALICIA
What've I got to be afraid of?

LAFAYETTE
You oughta know.
 (Goes up to her)

ALICIA
You won't hurt me.

LAFAYETTE
Unless you ask me to.

ALICIA
You mean, I gotta ask?

LAFAYETTE
Naw.
 (HE embraces her and THEY kiss)

ALICIA
Ow. What are you doing?

LAFAYETTE
Naw. I just want a little feel.
 (HE gently bounces her breast)
Ting-a-ting-a-ting-a-ting.

ALICIA
 (Pulling away)
I don't like that.

LAFAYETTE
Naw, wait. What do you like?

ALICIA
Touch me serious.

LAFAYETTE
I'm always serious.
(THEY embrace)

ALICIA
How do I taste?

LAFAYETTE
Good.

ALICIA
Not like blue cheese?

LAFAYETTE
Naw. Yeah.

ALICIA
I do?

LAFAYETTE
Yeah, you do. Sorta like Paul Newman's dressing.
(There is a noise outside; ALICIA pulls away)

LAFAYETTE (cont'd)
You want to go?
(Makes a grand gesture)
Why didn't you say so?

ALICIA
I didn't say that. Only it's not very private.

LAFAYETTE
Maybe if I did something to the lights.
(ALICIA and LAFAYETTE kiss in the dark)

ALICIA

Hey, why don't you take off your shirt? Aren't you hot?

LAFAYETTE

Sure. You take off yours, too. Just leave on your bra.

ALICIA

What if I don't want to...?

LAFAYETTE

That's cool.

ALICIA

You don't let me finish. What if I don't want to leave on my bra?

LAFAYETTE

All right. You're unbelievable.

(THEY continue to fondle and kiss each other)

LAFAYETTE (cont'd)

Wait up. Let me get my pants off, too. You don't mind, right?

ALICIA

(Pushing away)

Lafayette, don't.

LAFAYETTE

What you saying?

ALICIA

Just don't. Okay?

LAFAYETTE

(Not deterred)

Your shorts're tight. I gotta get that zipper.

ALICIA

I don't want you to...

LAFAYETTE

Now, baby, don't be like that.

ALICIA

Lafayette.

LAFAYETTE

Put your hand in here.

ALICIA

Stop.

LAFAYETTE

Don't be shy now. Go on. I won't disappoint you. Looka here.

ALICIA

No.

LAFAYETTE

No, what?

ALICIA

I don't wanna.

LAFAYETTE

You expect me to believe that?

ALICIA

I wanna go. Lemme go. Let go.

LAFAYETTE

Billy says you aching.

ALICIA

Well, I'm not. I don't like that. Now, let go.
(LAFAYETTE releases her)

ALICIA` (cont'd)

You're...

LAFAYETTE

What? I'm nothing.

ALICIA

You got that right.

LAFAYETTE

Don't cry.

ALICIA

Move.

(SHE pushes him)

LAFAYETTE

Don't be doing that.

(HE grabs her hands)

ALICIA

Let go, you fucker.

LAFAYETTE

Don't be pushing on me.

ALICIA

You make me sick.

LAFAYETTE

Why you gotta say that?

ALICIA

Let me out.

(SHE slaps at him several times; HE grabs her and pins her against the wall. Suddenly loud talking can be heard from the corridor)

ALICIA (cont'd)

What are you going to do to me?

LAFAYETTE

(HE quickly jabs her nipple with a finger)

Ding-dong. Anyone home?

ALICIA

You're dead.

(SHE exits; LAFAYETTE remains.)

END OF SCENE

Scene 4

Setting: MISS VANDERHOFF's classroom. Later that morning.

At Rise: MISS VANDERHOFF sits at her desk.

LAURIE

(Entering)

Miss V? I brought my essay, I mean my recitation. Can I give it now?

(Reciting from memory)

I'll start. "MY PERSONAL ESSAY: When I was ten years old, I asked my mother to let me join the tennis club at Our Sisters of Guadeloupe Church. I knew that I wanted to play tennis from my early childhood. In fact, I bought an outfit even before I learned how to hold the racket. On Saturday mornings, I began going to the courts with my little brother. After warming up, the team instructor taught us how to play. He showed us how to run and swing the racket, and how to serve the ball. But after several months I still couldn't hit the ball, or when I did, it rolled under the net or bounced away to the side.

Eventually I grew discouraged. and finally I told the coach I wanted to quit. Mr. Reynolds asked me into his office. He sat down and smiled at me. Even now I can remember his kind expression. He told me to be patient. He said that I must continue to practice, and that if I did, I was sure to improve. I listened to his words and returned home that day with a heavy heart."

LAURIE (cont'd)

"The following Saturday I went back to Church, and I continued to play there for the rest of the school year. And that summer I practiced every day with diligence. Finally, our team was chosen to play at the championship. And at that game, I won a trophy. That day, the coach's words came back to me...

ALICIA

(Storms in. To MISS V:)
Your little darling
Lafayette tried to rape
me, but you've got your
head so far up your ass
you don't know nothing.

MISS VANDERHOFF

What was that? What did
she say?

BILLY

(Shouting from the door:)

MISS V! THEY GOT LAFAYETTE DOWN IN THE PRINCIPAL'S
OFFICE. SECURITY'S GOT HIM IN CUFFS.
(HE flies back out)

MISS VANDERHOFF

Wait, Billy! Billy!
(MISS VANDERHOFF follows him out)

LAURIE

(SHE hesitates for a moment, then continues her
recitation)

"Don't ever give up. You will succeed, if you try hard.
But you must play with all our heart."

(SHE remains still, anxiously waiting.
Suddenly, MISS VANDERHOFF reenters)

LAURIE (cont'd)

(Excitedly)

What'd you think? I know I rushed a little, but it was
pretty good, wasn't it?

MISS VANDERHOFF

Didn't you hear what Billy said? They've arrested
Lafayette.

LAURIE

Did you hear the ending? I could do it again. I
followed the assignment, and I stayed up all last night
practicing. I didn't make a single mistake. Will you
give me an "A"? I really want an "A."

MISS VANDERHOFF

Oh, be quiet. You're chattering like an idiot. Is that
all you can think of? Really! I hate that.

(LAURIE begins to cry)

I'm sorry I said that, dear. Please forgive me. I'm
upset. I'm not myself.

LAURIE

(LAURIE gathers up her belongings)

Yes, you are.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Please, dear.

LAURIE

And stop calling me that. I'm not your dear.
(LAURIE runs out of the room)

BILLY

(Reenters. To MISS VANDERHOFF:)
Hey, what'd you do to Laurie? You're too mean sometimes,
you know what I'm saying?

MISS VANDERHOFF

Hello, Billy. Is there something?

BILLY

So what happened? Lafayette's in some shit, huh?

MISS VANDERHOFF

I can't talk, Billy. I really can't. Was there anything
else?

BILLY

Yeah, I wanna know why you told my mother I'm not
passing.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Because I'm required by law to report the progress of my
students.

BILLY

Then why am I passing my other classes then? Huhn, tell
me that.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Because you fulfilled the class requirements, I presume.

BILLY

Well?

MISS VANDERHOFF

But you haven't met my expectations, although I give you
a lot of credit for trying.

BILLY

I know what you're doing, you're trying to make me fail.

MISS VANDERHOFF

I wouldn't know how to make you do anything.

BILLY

I do my work.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Billy, it would be wrong for me to let you pass when you are reading so far below grade level. I just can't do it.

BILLY

Naw, man, you're talking shit.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Please, I expect a little more respect.

BILLY

What about me? You act real cool sometimes, but you don't care. Besides that, you never liked me. Naw, that's true. Ask anybody.

(Gets up to leave)

MISS VANDERHOFF

Sit down. You're upset.

BILLY

You always be on me and shit.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Oh, for God's sake, now who put that into your head?

BILLY

I don't gotta listen to you.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Billy, what's come over you? You can take the class over again in the summer.

BILLY

What if I don't wanna? Forget summer school. I don't wanna go to no summer school. Naw, forget that.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Look at the way you're acting. Come on now. Take a seat. What's gotten into you? We can talk.

BILLY

Huhn? Naw. I know you. I know what you're doing. But I am going to graduate. You'll see. You just wait. You can't stop me. There's nothing to talk about. Just gimme a "D," so I can pass.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Is that what you want, just a "D"?

BILLY

Huhn? Yeah. But you don't care. You only care about Lafayette. But they're going to expel his ass, huhn?

MISS VANDERHOFF

Billy, do you have to talk like that? I thought you liked Lafayette.

BILLY

Naw, he's stupid. I told him Alicia had the hots for him, but everyone knows she's...whatever.

MISS VANDERHOFF

What? Knows what? Tell me.

BILLY

I don't gotta tell you nothing.

MISS VANDERHOFF

What did I tell you about using a double negative?

BILLY

I don't gotta tell you shit. Better?

MISS VANDERHOFF

(MISS VANDERHOFF stares at BILLY, soaking it all in)

So you encouraged him?

BILLY

Hey, don't try to pin...

MISS VANDERHOFF

You set him up.

BILLY

I didn't think he was stupid enough to do nothing. Being such a school-boy and all. How was I supposed to know?

MISS VANDERHOFF

You can have your "D."

BILLY

Wha....?

MISS VANDERHOFF

Unless you'd prefer a "C"? Would you prefer a gentleman's "C"?

BILLY

A "C"? Yeah, but...

MISS VANDERHOFF

But you're not a gentleman. I understand. No, you're right. Why settle for a "C," when you could have a "A"?

BILLY

Huhn? Whatever. I just wanna pass.

MISS VANDERHOFF

I didn't think you were prepared, but you are. You'll do fine. You deserve an "A."

BILLY

You're shitting me.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Don't you deserve an "A"? You've served your time.

BILLY

You're tripping.

MISS VANDERHOFF

How long has it been? How long have you been with us?

BILLY

Where?

MISS VANDERHOFF

And your rights! Mustn't forget you have rights.

BILLY

What are you talking about?

MISS VANDERHOFF

You have rights, but does that make it right? I'll take an essay on that. Come on, now. Five hundred words.

BILLY

I turned in my final.

MISS VANDERHOFF

We've got to get you to where you'll be better off. Isn't that what it's all about? To better ourselves? To live better? I'd only be holding you back. We wouldn't want that on our conscience, would we? Better pass you on. Anything to get rid of you.

BILLY

Hey, it's not my fault Alicia didn't want to get fucked. But maybe you do.

(MISS VANDERHOFF slaps him across the face.
BILLY, stunned, goes to the door and exits.)

STUDENT BODY PRESIDENT

(Very loud over the PA)

Bulldogs, guess who?

(MISS VANDERHOFF, standing alone, goes to her desk and begins packing up, when the PA starts up again:)

STUDENT BODY PRESIDENT (cont'd)

That's right. This is your one and only Student Body President. Have you been to the student store yet to buy your caps and gowns? Better hurry, guys. Today I'm proud to announce the results of our Senior Class election: 62% of the graduating seniors voted for Millennial Dogs, as this year's class name. Congratulations. Let's see that we all live up to the challenge. Now here is our Principal, Mr. Cool himself, with a few words:

(MISS VANDERHOFF accidentally knocks an object off her desk, pauses, then clears off everything else. SHE then picks up the metal pole, and goes to close windows)

THE PRINCIPAL

Thank you. Boys and girls, I just wanted to reiterate the importance of you Seniors getting over to the student store to make your deposit on your caps and gowns, and to be sure to purchase tickets for this year's magnificent trip to Six Flags. Remember now, \$125 gets you the cap and gown and your pass to a truly memorable evening.

(MISS VANDERHOFF eyes the PA speaker on the wall, and takes a swing at it.)

Don't miss out on what promises to be the highlight of your senior year. Let's show everyone that the Bulldogs are real fighters.

(MISS VANDERHOFF takes another swing and connects. SHE now moves in on the target and begins striking the speaker again and again until it falls off the wall. Lights out.)

STILES' VOICE

(Amplified, as though through the PA:)

Miss Vanderhoff. Miss Vanderhoff, are you all right?

(Lights up)

MR. STILES

Miss Vanderhoff. Miss Vanderhoff, are you all right?

MISS VANDERHOFF

(Cries out)

I wanted to save him. I could have saved him.

MR. STILES

Who? Who did you want to save?

MISS VANDERHOFF

He was a real student.

MR. STILES

Billy?

MISS VANDERHOFF

Billy is no student.

MR. STILES

Billy most certainly is a student. A student you were legally bound to protect.

MISS VANDERHOFF

He is uneducable.

MR. STILES

Not according to state law. Nor to district policy. It's in our vision statement: ALL STUDENTS CAN LEARN.

MISS VANDERHOFF

And where in that statement does it say ALL STUDENTS MUST STUDY? It's a two way street. Despite my size, Mr. Stiles, I am not a dancing bear.

MR. STILES

Can we bring this back. We were talking about Billy. You were telling me what happened that day in your room. And you've admitted hitting him. You struck him across the face.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Yes.

MR. STILES

So you confirm his statement. And he never touched you, is that right?

(Silence)

Miss Vanderhoff, this is very important. Did the boy hit you?

MISS VANDERHOFF

No.

MR. STILES

And then what happened?

MISS VANDERHOFF

Nothing. As I've said. He left the room.

MR. STILES

What did he say? He must have said something.

MISS VANDERHOFF

After...?

MR. STILES

After you struck him. Yes. Did he say anything? Did you? Were there threats? Did you threaten him?

MISS VANDERHOFF

No. Never.

MR. STILES

He says you threatened to fail him if he told anyone. If he reported the incident, you would see that he never graduated.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Did I?

MR. STILES

Did you?

MISS VANDERHOFF

There was no threat. It is exactly as I have reported. I told him he would not graduate and then I hit him.

MR. STILES

Were there any further words?

MISS VANDERHOFF

Yes. Yes, there were.

(BILLY reappears, holding his hand to his cheek)

BILLY

I never had a teacher who disrespected me like that. You crazy bitch. You don't have the right. Not even my mother!

MISS VANDERHOFF

You think too much about how you ought to be treated.

BILLY

I oughta knock you out.

(HE exits)

MR. STILES

At least somebody used restraint. Besides being against the state law, not to mention district policy, what you did was wrong. No child deserves physical abuse. You do know that.

MISS VANDERHOFF

That boy's honor is not more important than his education.

MR. STILES

That boy does indeed deserve our respect.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Billy is a lout. And I am not one bit sorry for what I did.

MR. STILES

You know, Miss Vanderhoff, you are going to find yourself totally alone, expressing these ideas, which I can safely say few people share. We are talking about children.

MISS VANDERHOFF

My generation doesn't like children. I've devoted myself to teaching, because I believe they have a lot to learn. You never stop talking about your concern for the young, but what have you got to teach? "If we're nice to them, they'll be nice to us?"

MR. STILES

You've got some strange ideas. But did you ever stop to think...?

MISS VANDERHOFF

...about what?

MR. STILES

...about the consequences.

MISS VANDERHOFF

The consequences? I live the consequences. I don't have to stop to think of them.

MR. STILES

And so does Lafayette.

MISS VANDERHOFF

What are you talking about, Mr. Stiles?

MR. STILES

Listen, I'm not -- I don't know how to say -- blaming you. Not exactly, but.... Just what....Why was Lafayette in your room alone?

(Silence)

You took a chance. Look what happened.

MISS VANDERHOFF

"Look what happened." They treated him like an animal.
But what really occurred?

MR. STILES

According to you?

MISS VANDERHOFF

Nothing.

MR. STILES

According to you. That's not what was reported.

MISS VANDERHOFF

She got her feelings hurt.

MR. STILES

That's what you say.

MISS VANDERHOFF

What adolescent girl hasn't? So now it's a crime?

MR. STILES

Where are you getting your information? What did Alicia
say? What did she tell you?

MISS VANDERHOFF

I never spoke with her.

MR. STILES

You never spoke? Why?

MISS VANDERHOFF

She stormed out of the room. She was hysterical. She
ran to the girls' Dean. He called security.

MR. STILES

So what you've related is Lafayette's version?

MISS VANDERHOFF

Everyone took Alicia's side.

MR. STILES

I'm surprised that you didn't.

MISS VANDERHOFF
Lafayette deserved my loyalty.

MR. STILES
Absolutely not.

MISS VANDERHOFF
Not that it did him any good.

MISS VANDERHOFF
Your loyalty belongs to your profession. Once you give that up, you have no business being in a classroom.

MISS VANDERHOFF
Exactly.

MR. STILES
Your actions have been nothing less than reckless. You never answered my question. How did Lafayette come to be in your room?

MISS VANDERHOFF
I lent him my keys.

MR. STILES
Your keys? What keys?

MISS VANDERHOFF
The keys on my key ring. My keys. The keys to the room, to my desk, to my file cabinet, the keys to my house, the keys to my car.

MR. STILES
Why in God's name would you do that?

MISS VANDERHOFF
I trusted him. Is that such a terrible thing?

MR. STILES
I'd say it was your job to protect your students, if not from each other, then from themselves.

MISS VANDERHOFF

I once believed that. I had been preoccupied for years with how my life...with how our lives - the lives of the teachers - are limited and diminished by threat, how we have been made to suffer, how our freedom and our comforts are affected by the students we fear. Lafayette made me see for the first time how fear can damage the person feared. The watchful glance, quickening steps, the whispers. How one is made to feel when all one can see in another person's eyes is restraint, or withdrawal, or panic. How could I expect Lafayette to learn from someone who is afraid? I believed in him. I wanted him to trust me. Fear can be a form of brutality, Mr. Stiles.

MR. STILES

But you cannot leave it up to the children.

MISS VANDERHOFF

No, you're right. Very seldom. Lafayette was an exception.

MR. STILES

I think that boy had you wrapped around his little finger.

MISS VANDERHOFF

That's absurd.

MR. STILES

You weren't very nice to Billy. You were not nice to Laurie. Not even to Alicia. Why so nice to Lafayette?

MISS VANDERHOFF

Nice? I'm not nice to anyone.

MR. STILES

It's been said that you've got a thing for black boys.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Is that what you think? That's outrageous!

MR. STILES

Miss Vanderhoff.

MISS VANDERHOFF

How dare you!

MR. STILES

Calm down.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Just who do you think you are?

MR. STILES

I work for the school district...I...

MISS VANDERHOFF

...One does not answer rhetorical questions.

MR. STILES

I'm only saying what I've heard. I'm trying to investigate...

MISS VANDERHOFF

And that's what you've come up with? You sound like Billy.

MR. STILES

Try to calm down, Miss Vanderhoff.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Will you stop saying that? I find that very offensive.

MR. STILES

Your favoritism hasn't gone unnoticed.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Why do I have to defend my interest in this young man?

MR. STILES

You shouldn't have made an exception out of Lafayette.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Lafayette is exceptional. I didn't make an exception out of him.

MR. STILES

You weren't fair.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Fair. Is it fair when every punishment is called violence, and a teacher's love, sex? You've turned the schools over to the kids.

MR. STILES

You should have treated him like the rest of the students.

MISS VANDERHOFF

We're paralyzed by this call for fairness, which is just an excuse to do nothing. I'm sick of it. It's nothing more than a tyranny of neglect.

MR. STILES

But you had a duty to enforce the rules.

MISS VANDERHOFF

It sickens me that I should be made to pay for making an exception of the only worthy cause I've ever known: one student with the capacity to learn, the only real student I've had in years.

(STILES laughs)

MISS VANDERHOFF (cont'd)

You think I'm joking.

MR. STILES

I think you exaggerate. I know how you feel, Miss Vanderhoff, but there are other students.

MISS VANDERHOFF

No, no, no, no, no.

MR. STILES

There are thousands of students who need you.

MISS VANDERHOFF

There are no students.

MR. STILES

You had other students in that classroom. Laurie? You don't talk very much about her.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Being a success in school is not the same as being a student. Laurie did not have the same needs as Lafayette. She did not have the same talents.

MR. STILES

He must consider himself very lucky to have had such a caring teacher. Have you been able to visit him?

MISS VANDERHOFF

His aunt got the matter transferred out to where she and Lafayette will be living.

(LAFAYETTE approaches)

LAFAYETTE

Hey, V. Miss V.

MISS VANDERHOFF

I'm sorry I couldn't see you earlier. I've been on the run all morning. You all right?

LAFAYETTE

Yeeah.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Where were you yesterday?

LAFAYETTE

I went with my auntie to the post office, but...

MISS VANDERHOFF

You missed school to go to the post office?

LAFAYETTE

It's my birthday.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Your birthday!

LAFAYETTE

Yeeah.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Congratulations. I see you got your hair done.

LAFAYETTE

My auntie did it.

MISS VANDERHOFF

You look very handsome. If I had known, I would have gotten you something.

LAFAYETTE

That's all right.

MISS VANDERHOFF

(SHE hands him *The Gulag Archipelago Three*)

I do have a book for you. It's not a birthday present. You said you wanted to read the third volume, didn't you?

LAFAYETTE

Yeah.

MISS VANDERHOFF

(Gently scolding)

So that's why you haven't been in class? Your birthday's not more important than your education, I hope.

LAFAYETTE

Yeah. I mean, naw.

MISS VANDERHOFF

I've been dying to tell you. I talked to the Head Counselor and to the Principal, and I'm almost 100% sure they will agree to let you skip a grade, if you'll attend two intercessions this summer. Isn't that marvelous? You'll be able to graduate with your class, and you won't be a year behind. Now, I want you to bring your aunt in tomorrow to speak with Mr. Allen. And, Lafayette, I'd like you to wear something nice. Make a good impression, all right?

LAFAYETTE

I ain't gonna be here tomorrow.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Of course, you are.

(Seeing that he means it)

Why not?

LAFAYETTE

Got something to do.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Something to do? Don't be silly!

LAFAYETTE

My auntie and them's moving. I gotta help and stuff, you know.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Moving? You barely checked in here, Lafayette. Where is she taking you?

LAFAYETTE

They got them a house and all.

MISS VANDERHOFF

A house? Where? Not out of this district?

LAFAYETTE

I don't know exactly. It takes about forty minutes to get out there.

MISS VANDERHOFF

How will you graduate? You won't graduate.

LAFAYETTE

She call it her little dream house.

MISS VANDERHOFF

That's very nice, Lafayette, but you need these credits. Listen...

LAFAYETTE

Naw, you listen. Naw, see. I can't be up in here. My PO wants to send me back to the Halls.

MISS VANDERHOFF

What Halls? All I know is, you've simply got to finish out the year. I think your aunt's being very selfish.

LAFAYETTE

They wanna put me back in jail.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Alicia dropped those silly charges.

LAFAYETTE

That don't matter.

MISS VANDERHOFF

And besides that, she won't even be around. She's graduating. And so will you.

LAFAYETTE

Naw. They don't care about that. I violated probation. My auntie and them's moving and my new PO's agreed to give me a second chance.

MISS VANDERHOFF

I want to believe things will be better for you.

LAFAYETTE

Yeeah.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Don't... Oh, Lafayette, I want you to remember to show everybody what a wonderful human being you are. Do you hear me?

LAFAYETTE

Yeeah.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Do you? And if you need a friend, you come and see me.

LAFAYETTE

Yeeah.

MISS VANDERHOFF

No "yeeah." Say "I promise."

LAFAYETTE

Promise. Miss V, I gotta jam.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Is this goodbye?

LAFAYETTE

Naw. Yeah. I don't know.

(HE exits)

MISS VANDERHOFF

(To his back:)

Happy birthday.

(To MR. STILES:)

What have you decided, Mr. Stiles? I have the feeling you've already made up your mind.

MR. STILES

The Board has final say. It's a violation of the Ed. Code to touch the kids. They are waiting for the Superintendent's recommendation. The family wants you out.

MISS VANDERHOFF

I didn't realize the Superintendent's family was being consulted.

MR. STILES

The boy. Billy's family. I'm afraid they are insisting on a transfer.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Insisting...? Billy's family...? Are they in a position to insist?

MR. STILES

They have the right to press criminal charges.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Charges? You call them charges?

MR. STILES

Assault and battery. We've been able to talk them out of that, in exchange for an agreement...

MISS VANDERHOFF

...to transfer me out?

MR. STILES

Of course, Billy will be allowed to graduate.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Of course.

MR. STILES

And the family requests an apology. It is Billy's sole demand.

MISS VANDERHOFF

So now Billy's calling the shots.

MR. STILES

That's not fair.

MISS VANDERHOFF

(Laughs)

Hooray for Billy. I had no idea it had gone so far. My God, I should have known. It was naive of me to think that as a teacher I would be backed up.

MR. STILES

Billy's brother will be entering your school in two years. The family is concerned. Look: there's no reason to think a new assignment will not be a success. We can't just stand still. And, it so happens, I can even offer you a choice of schools.

MISS VANDERHOFF

There are no schools.

MR. STILES

I understand, Miss Vanderhoff. Lincoln Heights is a fine school, but there are better schools.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Lincoln Heights is not a school. The children are in charge now. Billy is in charge.

MR. STILES

Don't be ridiculous.

MISS VANDERHOFF

Am I being ridiculous?

MR. STILES

We have Principals who would kill for a teacher of your experience.

MISS VANDERHOFF

You're not looking for teachers. You want heroes, who will sacrifice themselves because they care, who will make grand gestures for a year or two, or until something better comes along. I should have gotten out, as soon as it stopped being a school.

MR. STILES

You keep saying that.

MISS VANDERHOFF

How can it be a school? You don't know the difference between appeasement and nurturance.

(A realization; to herself)

It is as though I were a stranger in my own home.

MR. STILES

Nobody's being appeased. We seek to satisfy both sides.

MISS VANDERHOFF

(Ignoring STILES; SHE looks over the room)

Isn't it funny how these walls don't go all the way to the ceiling?

MR. STILES

We can't stand still. That's what history teaches.

MISS VANDERHOFF

(An epiphany)

Temporary walls for temporary people.

MR. STILES

Miss Vanderhoff?

MISS VANDERHOFF

The entire nation, a revolving door.

MR. STILES

I have worked very hard putting this transfer together. You could have lost your job.

MISS VANDERHOFF

I appreciate your effort, but I refuse to agree to Billy's terms.

MR. STILES

They are not Billy's terms. They are the Superintendent's.

MISS VANDERHOFF

That's not an obvious distinction. Thank you, but I've decided to resign.

MR. STILES

Resign? Now? But why?

MISS VANDERHOFF

There are no students. It's not a school. What is there for me to do?

MR. STILES

If you could just wait...to give us time... No one planned for you just to walk away.

MISS VANDERHOFF

I don't see why not. A good teacher plans for every contingency.

MR. STILES

You are being selfish. You want everything to adapt to you, but you have to learn to adjust. That's what education is, preparing for and accepting change. I can find you a better spot.

MISS VANDERHOFF

On the theory that anything is better than nothing? I'd prefer to stand at the back of a bus, telling passengers to put out their cigarettes. At least there would be a point.

MR. STILES

You ignore the fact that we are doing a much better job of serving the needs of all children.

MISS VANDERHOFF

I'm sure I no longer know what those are.

MR. STILES

You're naive if you think hypocrisy is confined to education. You think teachers are the only ones? Look what's happening in medicine. Do you know what doctors and lawyers are going through?

MISS VANDERHOFF

I'm sure I will always find something to do.
(SHE gets up to leave)

MR. STILES

You struck that boy. You're forgetting that. We're talking child abuse. You could lose your license. If they prosecute, and you are convicted, you could lose everything. You are making a mistake. Have you considered your pension?

MISS VANDERHOFF

I can always teach in the prisons; I've had lots of experience.

MR. STILES

I won't try to stop you, but what of the children? Have you thought about them?

MISS VANDERHOFF

Mr. Stiles, have you not heard a word I've said? I don't like children.

END OF PLAY

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