

Nature has always had more force than education

Voltaire



# NO AIR

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## I. DEREK

I go to a school with no windows. Like, no windows. None. What were they thinking? The architects, I mean, or whatever. Ma says in the '70s, when I was just a seed, they tore down a perfectly good building, like loaded with all windows and s—, and put up this crapola place 'cause they were scared of gang bangers going crazy and breaking in. So now we haveta sit in this excuse for a school all day while I'm wondering if there really is a day or if it turned into night while I was in geometry.

Ms. Hackle'll be going on and on, drawing polygons and hypotenuses and equilaterals all over the board, and I'm ready to raise the roof. I mean, she's a good teacher and all, but I just wanna chill somewhere. The chick in front of me is wearing some heavy stink; the guy next to me has dreads down to his chest and reeks; some preppy's got on enough nasty Polo for a f— army. I look all 'round, and I'm like thinking: I'm goin' crazy! I can't breathe! Someone, *open a window!* After three years in this cell, I oughta know better.

I'm already on my feet, so I ask for a pass. Her pass is a toilet seat. Can you believe that? Are we like swirlin' or what? I grab it quick before she changes her mind, and try to look all casual, but I'm on a mission.

In this trap, weather's nothin' but a rumor. I gotta see daylight, y'know what I mean? I don't know if it's rainin' or snowin'. I make it past the hall monitors with their walkie-talkies, past the cops with their badges n' I'm on my way, man!

Then comes the hard part. See, all the doors are locked 'til lunch when they let us out. There isn't enough room in the school for all of us to eat, so they like try to make it look

like they're being all liberal and everything, calling it open campus. They like let us out 'cause they can't like deal with us. It's only first period, and I'm already wanting to like break out. But now I can breathe 'cause I see the door, and I'm going to see what's happenin' outside, man.

I press my face against the little window in the door. I see day right through the dirty scum on the glass. I'm tellin' you, this place is nasty. It like sucks. Reeks, man. There's grungy orange carpet in the halls everywhere and big ol' spots all over from spilled yogurt and that red lunch piss they pass off as juice. Milk's all over the stairway and makes me wanna puke 'cause it's turned all sour. There's enough dust in the corners to fill a sandwich. So there I am at the door leadin' out to the parking lot, and I like squeeze my nose into the little crack between the metal doors — air! Jesus! Air!

That's all I get — one second. "Hey! Got a pass? Let's see your pass, sir!"

I hate the way they call you *sir*. I ain't no sir. I whip around ready to be all defensive, but it's just Steve, the one we call Mr. Clean. He's bald and built like a sumo wrestler, and he's got like the whole Mr. Clean act down, man.

"Hey, Steve, it's just me, man," I say.

"Awright, go on now, you're s'posed to be in class."

"Okay, Steve, we cool. Later."

I cut back, stop in the bathroom and like stretch out for awhile. Then, I know it's time. Ms. Hackle will be wonderin' by now, so I stroll on back to room 222 — math.

Not much changed. Kids in the same seats, in the same positions. No air. Chantell 'sleep, droolin' all over her isosceles triangle. Pete's taggin' his graph all over the desk. Ms. Hackle's sittin' down lookin' like she don't

wanna be here. 'Fact, she'd rather be any place but here. I just put my head down and wait for the bell. No sense even tryin'.

Wish someone'd blast a hole right through the ceiling.

## II. HARRIET HACKLE

Eyes, Justinian said, are the windows to the soul. If a child grows up with no windows in his daily environment, how does he feed his poor, hungry soul? How can he thrive and grow? I teach in a school where 2,000 pairs of beautiful brown, black, blue, green and hazel eyes see no windows. In 1970, after the race riots, schools were built like fortresses to prevent window damage. What about damage to the soul?

We can't see out. Only in. It's too hard to focus. At passing time, we all pour into the filth that crowds the hallways — wax cartons strewn everywhere, trails of congealed juice, chocolate doughnuts stuck upside down on the stained carpet. I hold my breath from the bottom of one flight of stairs to the top of the next to keep from inhaling the noxious odors of graffiti remover and stale food. I've taken to wearing big brown boots to slog through it.

The "engineers," as custodians or janitors are now called, can't keep up with the debris and graffiti. I tell you, this place is not fit for human beings, especially children. The list of students with asthma is three full pages, single-spaced, double columns. I called the health department because I had three respiratory infections in two months. They sent out a pasty-faced guy in a grey suit who carried a clipboard and made sly remarks about engineers not working hard enough. He picked his way delicately through the litter in his wingtips and said it looked normal to him.

When the 2:45 bell rings, those of us with any self-respect left flee immediately. Outside is the other world, a world of lakes and trees and bicycles. The smell of pine and earth. The sparkle of sun on water. The sight of birds.

Some days it just gets to me. This was one of those days. My husband doesn't like it because he says I'm "heating the outdoors," but I like to crack open our bedroom window, summer and winter. This morning, the sun popped between red and orange maple leaves, shone through my eyelids and bore deep down into my eyes. That magnificent orb just pried open my sleeping soul and revived it. My soul said, "Woman, you are alive! Wake to the day! Glory in it!" My bedraggled spirit moaned for pity and cried, "Stay in bed under the covers where no one will find you."

### III. LARRY HACKLE

That particular morning my wife stayed in bed way past the alarm. Had to drag her into the bathroom. The covers were still tangled around her legs, so we both fell into the tub. I propped her up at the sink, wiped her poor, sad face with a wet wash-cloth and said, "You bring home half the bacon around here. Get up and get crackin'!" We've been through this before. Sometimes a little humor pulls her out of these slumps. Pretty tough for her to make a complete attitude adjustment. She likes her job, but her doc diagnosed clinical depression. Trouble is, she won't take Prozac because she says it makes her fat.

I got her dressed, fed her and sent her out. Toast crumbs were still stuck to her shirt front, grape juice dribbles on her pants. I couldn't figure out why she piled those tools into her trunk, but she wasn't in the mood for questions so I let it go.

### IV. HARRIET

I planned it on East Side High School's Homecoming. Enough chaos to provide cover. A loose day.

No use in planning a lesson. We all just show up and pretend. Though some of the cruel teachers like to plan quizzes. The rest of us kick back and slide, trying to keep things under control. Larry had all the tools I needed. Lucky I remembered his big leather apron to keep it all handy.

### V. DARLENE

I work in the office of East Side High School. Most of the time, I like my job. Can't help but like the kids. We got all kinds here, from really smart to retard, I mean handicapped. Or is it challenged? Can't keep up. I been here a darn long time. Make it my business to know everyone. Even the kids, I know a lot of them too. We've got pret'near 2,000, and I'd say I know most all of 'em by face. I keep a big jar of candy on my desk, and the kids empty it most days. Try to get 'em to thank me. Teach 'em some manners. Teachers are nice enough, I s'pose. Administration treats me right. Pay's good. But, wanna know what saves me? I'll tell ya.

Smoke breaks. I plan 'em with the other gal who works upstairs in counseling. We go across the street, not right next to the kids – that wouldn't be right – but on the same curb. I notice more and more kids smoking on the top steps of old Mrs. Hallahan's house. Right at her front door. She calls up pretty regular and shouts into the phone. I'd be mad too. Kids toss their butts right into her tulips. Most don't have a mother at home to tell 'em any different. Cops are so busy inside the school building, they don't see what goes on outside. Or they look the other way.

I smoke more'n I useta 'cause every coupla hours I gotta get outta here, know what I mean? Gets to me. People comin' and goin'. There's a heckuva lotta traffic around my desk. Angry kids hauled in after a fight, cops gettin' rough, V.P. gettin' royally p.o.'d. I try to help them all. A lotta these kids don't have two dimes to rub together, so I let 'em use my

phone when they have emergencies. And they have 'em, believe you me. Lockers broken into. Books stolen. You name it. It's not easy, what with phone calls comin' in right and left. If I don't have the answer right away, some folks shout into the phone like I'm nothin', like I'm dirt, y'know? You gotta keep your cool. I'm the gal who's supposed to know everything, but like I say, it's my pack a day that keep me goin'. I've thought about quittin' – cigarettes, I mean – but air inside's no cleaner than what I inhale.

### VI. GENGHIS LYON

I'm the principal of East Side High School. It's a good school – outstanding staff, great kids, plenty of diversity, people willing to try new things. Everyone knows the buck stops here. I keep the lid on tight. East Side's the kind of school where all hell'd break loose otherwise. I let people know where I stand. Fact is, I teach a course for the district teachers called Alternatives in Understanding. Our focus is to see the world from different perspectives. I try to break up teacher rigidity that sets in with a mature staff.

Our dwindling dollars make staffing and budget decisions difficult. We bought a security video camera to locate potential criminal behavior. We cut locker vandalism by 48 percent, reduced graffiti by 56 percent, and 75 percent of our parents feel safer sending their kids to school. We're proud of our results.

Last school I ran had a beautiful plant. The facility here, well, it's not ideal. Education's a funny business. It's a balance between structured discipline and inspired creativity. After that bad period in the '60s when people went crazy and destroyed school buildings, we had to protect our investment. We just couldn't let it happen again. It's too costly to keep replacing glass. I mean, you figure your numbers. You got your number of windows times your schools, and you got your formu-

la for taxpayer cost. On the other hand, when we ask our bright young minds to think when they can't see the outside world, well, it's tricky business. It can be done, though. Takes a special kind of skill. Some of the good ones have it built in. After my years in this business, I come to believe it can't be taught. But there I am on my soapbox again. The wife catches me on that all the time.

### VII. DEREK

Ms. Hackle's acting like really weird. She's like pacing all around her desk, like she's real nervous. Never seen her like this. Wonder if she's planning to nail someone. She's like that. Always plotting. Monday, surprise quiz. Wednesday, new stuff we gotta learn. Friday, mongo homework. But she's like workin' somethin' out in her head. Wish she'd just come out with it.

### VIII. HARRIET

Here's how it happened. Lunchtime, kids all over the halls, no one paying attention to the schedule, the usual free-for-all. The metal doors clicked open earlier than usual so kids could work in the parking lot on their homecoming floats. Derek has a sixth sense, so I kept him at bay when he followed me to the parking lot. I got what I needed out of the trunk of my car, carried it in, covered it with a blanket and books.

"Can I give you a hand with that, Ms. Hackle?"

"No, no, it's not heavy..."

"Whatever.... Ya sure?"

"Thanks anyway, Derek." I love the kids. They're my *raison d'être*. They deserve better. I lugged it to my office and locked the door behind me. I'm on a north wall, away from the parking lot where kids can hear me. Inside, the brass band was circulating through the hallways playing the school rouser over and over again. Cheerleaders were shaking their pompoms. Danceline was putting on a mini-

halftime routine in the commons. The rest of the kids were decorating doors.

I pulled out the sledgehammer, mask and goggles. I let out the fury behind my arms and shoulders. Just the way my self-defense teacher showed us. I heard a knock on the door from time to time, but I ignored it. Kids who think they need me today will need this even more tomorrow. I timed my work to coincide with the loudest booms from the band. I blasted away through sheetrock and concrete, chunks of stuff flying all over. I'm in pretty good shape, if I do say so myself. When light broke through, I felt a rush so intense I thought I was going to faint.

Lunch hour was up. Fifth hour was about to begin. I had to quit. I put away my tools. My window was cut. At long last.

### IX. PRINCIPAL LYON

Some decisions take a firm and resolute mind. Letting Ms. Hackle go was one of those. I don't know what got into her. Imagine a teacher destroying school property like that? She was so close to retirement. She was one of our finest teachers. It's a crying shame. But, I am a principal of principle. Rules are rules. We can't have teachers going around carving holes in the school. Not when we're trying to teach respect.

### X. DEREK

Yeah! All Right!!! Ms. Hackle came through. She rocks the world! Like totally cool. My buddy said she showed up for fifth period late with an expression like she just made up a new formula, wearin' a hardhat, work gloves and a leather apron. She said, "I've got something to show you!" There weren't many kids there, just some nerds decorating doors, but she like picked up a few on the march down the hall – 20 or 30 kids in her little cubicle, man. That's a tight fit. My buddy said

she was still grinnin' when Lyon walked in. He's a big guy, so my buddy checked outta that scene. Figured no sense stickin' around to see the fireworks.

### XI. LARRY

My poor wife. Maybe there's more to this menopause thing than either one of us knew. She's been in trouble before, but this was outrageous. When she left this morning, she looked normal. I mean, I just couldn't have predicted it. I've got the best defense lawyer in town. I'll have her outta there in no time. Meantime, I'll have to figure out how to manage without her income.

### XII. DARLENE

Well, the news hit the office pretty quick. I just got back from my smoke break and the whole place was buzzin' like bees in a bonnet. When I found out, I was whopper-jawed. Never thought she'd do a thing like that. She had to know she wasn't going to get away with it. Harriet Hackle, boy, you gotta hand it to her. Guess she got sick and tired of things around here. 'Course they patched up the hole right away. Cops came and took her to the station. She didn't even look scared. She carried on quite a bit about the handcuffs though. Can't say as I blame her.

### XIII. HARRIET

After they booked me and talked to me awhile, they put me in a locked ward at Central Hospital downtown. That's a little extreme, I think. I'm still glad I did it. Hope they keep the window open so the kids can breathe. Souls need air. Even from here in the ward, there's a little window above the bed where I can see a patch of trees and sky. What I can't see I fill in with my imagination – sparkling lakes with birds flying overhead, the smiles on kids' faces when they look out the window. ♫