

Confrontation

This story is fictional. But it's the way Jesse would do things, I'm pretty sure. She's going to be an incredible teacher.

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"Jesse, you can't do that. They'll fire you!"

I'd only been teaching full time for three weeks, and already I was in trouble.

"I have to, Megan. It's not right. And you know it. Besides, I told her I was going to!"

I'd obtained a teaching job at a smaller elementary school in north Edmonton early in January. It was a fill-in job for a grade four teacher on Maternity Leave, and would only last until June, but it was a job. And teaching jobs were scarce at the moment. I'd been lucky.

"Jesse, you should just let it go. This won't do you any good."

Megan was referring to a conflict I was having with another teacher on staff. This teacher was experienced; she'd been teaching for over fifteen years, but I didn't like some of the things she was doing.

As a student teacher, I'd learned to keep my mouth shut. It was sad, but true. A student teacher's mark, and chances for a job after graduation, depended almost entirely upon a good practice teaching report ... as well as good marks in college, of course.

My instructors at college had told me: "Your supervising teacher is always right. Don't argue. Don't ever criticize what they do."

Very practical advice. I'd seen some things that had made me upset. But my own supervising teachers had been good teachers. I'd been lucky.

And here I was with my own classroom, doing a job I'd wanted for years and years. But the teacher in the classroom across from me was a jerk!

My friend Megan was a student teacher in the school; we'd known each other in college. She was someone I could confide in. I'd done a lot of that in the past three weeks.

I'd had some trouble adjusting to things in my own classroom during the first week or so. The teacher I was filling in for had her own routines, and her own way of doing things. I'd tried to stick to them as closely as possible, but I was starting to introduce a few routines of my own. The kids were responding well. I was pretty happy with the job I was doing.

The problem was the teacher in the class next door. At the end of my first week, she had taken me aside and 'filled me in' on all the students I'd be teaching.

"You have to start off firm", she told me. "Make sure they call you Mrs. Phillips."

I ignored that. I felt more comfortable with 'Miss Jesse'.

"And there are some students you'll have to watch out for. They're troublemakers!"

I didn't really want to hear this. But Esther wanted to tell me.

"Bobby is a thief. Don't ever let him near your desk. He'll take things."

Bobby was no such thing. He was gentle and caring, and had never shown the slightest interest in my desk.

"Maria is not very smart. I'm not sure why she's in grade four. She can't read, and her writing is painfully slow. You'll have to put in extra time helping her."

I didn't know much about Maria; she was very quiet. But she spent much of her free time reading. I didn't think there was a problem.

"And Albert ... he's the fat one ... "

"Esther, I would really rather not ... " But she went on and on, telling me everything she thought I would want to know about some of my 'more colourful' students. Her words.

The problem was *I didn't want to know anything*. I didn't want any preconceived ideas about my students.

Sometimes when you assume kids are wonderful ... and smart ... they try to live up to your expectations.

But the problem with Esther was worse than that. She took my class for a period in the afternoon, and together we did art with them. Sounds like fun, right?

Esther did everything that my college instructors had warned me never to do.

She had favourites, and she would praise them at every opportunity. These were the only students she ever said nice things to.

Some students she ignored completely. When they asked a question, she would answer, but she never made eye contact. When they answered her questions during a lesson, she didn't give them any feedback at all. None. Just a curt 'yes', or 'no'.

Some students she picked on. There was no other way to describe it ... she was constantly berating them for bad behaviour, real or imagined. She frequently sent students to see the Assistant Principal, often for seemingly innocuous behaviour.

I didn't know what the Assistant Principal was doing about it, but Esther kept sending them, so I assumed he was doing something.

I hadn't sent any students to the office yet. I believe that a teacher should handle her own problems. And so far I hadn't seen any problems I couldn't handle with a little talk out in the hallway.

From what I had seen of the kids in my class in the three weeks I'd been their teacher, they were pretty ordinary. Just average kids. And I loved every one of them.

But Esther. Some students she was just plain rude to. On more than one occasion she'd made fun of Albert, who was overweight and very sensitive about it. She would say things like: 'Albert, get a move on. I know you're heavy, but you can move faster than that'. Or 'Albert, you shouldn't be bringing pop in your lunch ... you need to lose some weight'.

She said these things in front of me, and in front of the other students.

Sometimes the way she treated Albert made me want to cry.

I'd confided all this to Megan. We'd discussed what I could do about it. I didn't want to get into trouble, but I couldn't let Esther keep treating my students that way.

The proper procedure, according to the 'Code of Ethics for Teachers', which we'd discussed thoroughly in one of my college classes, was to talk to the teacher I was having a problem with. I was supposed to tell her about the things that were bothering me, tell her why I thought they were wrong, and see if we could work out something that was mutually agreeable. It sounded good in theory.

Maybe she just didn't realize how awful she was being. I had to try.

So I made a list of all the things I'd seen her do that I thought were wrong, and put them in a letter, in case I needed it. I arranged to talk to her after school.

It didn't go well. In fact, it didn't go at all.

I started by telling her that I thought she was a good teacher, but that there some things she was doing that bothered me. I started with the kids she was ignoring.

That's as far as I got. She immediately jumped in. "Mrs. Phillips, I've been teaching for fifteen years, and no-one has ever had a problem with the job I have been doing. And

you've been here for, what, three weeks now? Perhaps you should mind your own business."

And she stormed off. This wasn't the way it was supposed to happen.

So Megan and I were discussing what I should do next. I'd left Esther a copy of my letter, hoping she might think about it and perhaps respond more favourably. In the letter I'd said that if we couldn't solve this, I would talk to the Assistant Principal.

But I wasn't hopeful.

Having talked to Esther about what was bothering me, and having left a copy of my concerns with her in writing, it now was permissible for me to talk to someone else about the problem. This was where Megan and I were in disagreement.

Megan thought I should just drop the whole thing, and try to ignore it. Complaining about another teacher, even if I'd followed all the rules, she said, probably wouldn't do my budding career any good.

I couldn't ignore it. My students were being hurt by Esther's thoughtlessness and rudeness. It wasn't right. I told Megan I was going to talk to the Assistant Principal. I figured, since he'd been the one dealing with Esther's 'problem' students, maybe he could help me.

I did that the next day.

I gave him a copy of the letter I'd written and left with Esther. He took a few minutes to read it.

When he was done, he took off his glasses, rubbed his eyes, sighed, and said to me: "Jesse, I've been in your classroom only twice since you started here, but I can see already that you are going to be a great teacher".

He paused for a moment. "But what you have to realize is that not all teachers are good ones, at least not all the time".

He thought for a minute or two. "I know that Esther is having some problems. She's treating some of her students unfairly. I know that. I just haven't figured out what I should do about it yet. Why don't you talk to her."

"But I did, and ..."

"No, that's not what I mean. She lives just one street over from the school ... here, I have her address." He gave it to me.

"You mean, visit her at home?"

“I think you should. Try to get to know her a little better. Apologize for getting off to a bad start with her.”

“But I didn’t do anything ...”

“I know, Jesse. Just try. Will you do that for me?”

I said I would. So I guess I had to. But I wasn’t looking forward to it.

I tried to be as positive as I could for the rest of that week. I tried to smile whenever I saw Esther. I’m not sure she noticed.

That Saturday morning, I had my husband Cole make a plate of cookies for me. He’s a wonderful cook. Someone should marry him!

In the afternoon I drove over to Esther’s house. I was still thinking about what I would say when Esther opened the door. “Oh, Jesse. What are you ...?”

“Hi, Esther. These are for you”. I held out the plate of cookies. “I wanted to come by to apologize. I think I shouldn’t have said what I did last week. I’m sorry.”

I think Esther was expecting another confrontation. I’d taken her by surprise. She invited me in.

We sat in her kitchen for a while, and talked. Not about our problems, just about ... things. We had quite a nice conversation. We even laughed about the PhysEd instructor’s hopeless efforts at getting a date with the Social Studies teacher.

We enjoyed the cookies, and talked some more. I left after about an hour or so, but we promised we’d get together for coffee after school one day the next week.

We hadn’t talked about our problems at all. But I found myself sort of liking Esther. She was a nice person outside of school.

Over the next month, Esther and I met regularly for coffee after school. I invited her to join my ceramics class on Monday evenings. She invited Cole and I over for dinner.

And then a strange thing happened. All on her own, Esther started talking about the kind of teacher she was.

“I know I haven’t been doing a very good job, Jesse.” She and I were sitting in the Tim Horton’s down the street from the school. “I wasn’t always this way. It’s just been ... difficult ... since my husband left”.

Esther was separated from her husband, and the divorce proceedings were not going well. "I guess I let my personal feelings influence the way ..."

She sobbed. "You were right to say something. I've known I wasn't being a very good teacher for some time now. I'm working on getting better. Thank you ... you're a good friend."

But I knew I hadn't been. I'd said something to her because I was upset. I never could have imagined becoming Esther's friend.

But I was. And I was glad.

Sometimes Assistant Principals get it right!

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Jesse and Cole are real people. Everyone else in this story is totally fictional, including the plot itself. But the last sentence is true.