

This is a fictional story about Jesse. I know it's fictional because it hasn't happened yet. But it might. And all the conversations with Cole are real.

Who, Me? A Junior High Teacher? Like, No Way!

You would think that with both my parents being teachers, I should be having an easy time of it in my education courses and practice teaching. Sadly, that isn't the case.

Oh, I'm getting good marks. Mostly A's, with a few B's. And it's nice being able to ask for help whenever I need it. My father has even come down to Edmonton a few times to help.

But becoming an elementary teacher is hard work! I've put in more hours on some of my assignments than I ever have on anything else before. Often I stay at school between classes to work on them.

And the job situation for next year is looking pretty bleak. There are jobs available, of course, but every one that comes open has two hundred applicants. The only way to get a job is to know someone on the inside. I don't.

That's because I want to work in the city. And that's where I'm doing my final nine-week practicum.

I'd told Cole about it. "The first five weeks were great!" He was sort of listening ... I was never sure, when he was playing Warhammer. But I kept talking anyway.

"I had a grade 4/5 split. The kids were so much fun!" But he knew all this. "Now that I'm doing some Junior High classes, I'm not so sure!"

"You'll do fine, honey!" Apparently he was listening. Or faking it. He was good at that.

My supervising teacher taught at the 4/5 level, but she also had some grade seven and eight classes too. I'd spent the first five weeks planning and teaching every day to the fours and fives. The planning had been a lot of work. But I'd done a good job.

But now I was supposed to teach grade eight science and grade nine math. I wasn't really interested in becoming a Junior High teacher, but my supervisor wanted me to try it, and ... well, you can't say no! Besides, if I wanted a job in the city, that might be all that was available, at least to start with. And we were supposed to be able to teach anything from grade one through grade nine.

So I wasn't really looking forward to the next four weeks.

I could have done my practicum at the school I'd attended. My father urged me to more than once. But that would mean leaving Cole for almost two months. We'd only been married a year. It wasn't going to happen.

Besides, I wanted a job in a city school.

“What do you think, honey? Will I do all right?”

Cole grunted something that I chose to interpret as a ‘yes’. Then I swatted him with a pillow. He became more attentive after that.

My first day in the morning Junior High classroom was just as an observer. I’d be using the afternoon, while my supervisor taught the fours and fives, to plan lessons and meet with her.

I didn’t much like what I saw. Junior High kids, especially the boys, can be a handful. And these kids were no exception.

I’d never understood how my father could teach Junior High for so many years. He’d told me once that his grade eleven and twelve classes were his favourite, but that he enjoyed teaching all the kids. I was thinking now that perhaps that was the reason he was losing his hair.

My supervising teacher was good at what she did, but I could see that the eight and nine classes were a chore. Classroom management was a skill she obviously had mastered, and she kept them in line and on task pretty well. But she had to keep after them all the time.

I wasn’t looking forward to this.

At lunch she asked me to prepare tomorrow’s grade nine lesson on multiplying polynomials. They’d already started; I just had to give them some more examples, and let them practice it.

When I looked at the seating plan, I knew I’d have another obstacle to overcome. In the class of thirty grade nine students, there were three Brookes, two Daniels, and four ... yes, four ... Michelles. Apparently Michelle was a popular name that year.

My supervisor laughed about it. “It’s easy to remember who is who. One Brooke is tall, one is black, and the other is short and rather plump. One Daniel has long stringy hair, and the other’s is curly. And the Michelles ... well, you get the idea. They all look different”

That was easy for her. I still had the other twenty-one names to learn. And one of the Daniels looked hyperactive.

The one disadvantage of teaching in a city school was that the classes tended to be pretty big. Thirty was actually smaller than average.

When I was in grade nine there'd been eleven of us.

My lesson started fairly well. I'd prepared some examples the previous evening using the Smartboard software on my laptop, and I went through them one by one. They all seemed to know how to multiply polynomials pretty well. Except for Michelle.

I wasn't sure which Michelle it was, but she had long black hair. I pretended not to notice the pimple on the end of her nose.

"What don't you understand, Michelle?"

"Mrs. Phillips, like, it's sort of confusing. Like, why do the numbers on the x's like, change?"

I'd forgotten that 'like' is a major component of every Junior High girl's vocabulary. Sort of an 'um...', except more versatile.

So I reviewed the exponent rules with her. I think she got it. Like, I thought so, anyway.

Then we got to the part where they had to practice it themselves. I'd prepared a sheet of problems for them, and handed these out. But I'd miscounted. We were one short.

"Uh, Brooke ... can you work with ... er ... Brooke?" Even I was confused.

"What? Work with her? Like, are you serious? We don't, like, get along!"

"Well, how about working with, uh, Brooke?" For some reason, all three Brookes were seated in the same row. I suspected my supervising teacher had done that on purpose. She had a twisted sense of humour. It's something my father would have done.

"Yeah, OK. Whatever".

Now that I'd solved that problem, I spent the next twenty minutes helping. I noticed that my supervisor didn't seem to be watching the lesson. I think she was putting on nail polish.

"Mrs. Phillips, why does it say 'simplify'? My answers are all, like, way more complicated than the problems!"

That was a good question. I'd never figured that one out either. In my grade twelve class I must have given my father nightmares. I was always asking him to explain the simplest things. And I'd never really seen the point of logarithms. Does anyone?

"It's like this, Arthur". I thought it was Arthur. I wasn't really sure. My seating chart was at the front of the room on the desk. But Arthur, or whoever he was, didn't complain.

“When you see the word ‘simplify’, just think ‘multiply’, OK?” I suspected that was wrong. But the supervisor wasn’t paying attention. I’d find out later and correct things tomorrow, if I had to.

I had the students put the answers on the board. I checked them all, and there weren’t any mistakes. A quick show of hands revealed that no-one had made more than two errors. I loved formative assessments!

As the students plodded out of the room, I went to talk to my supervisor, who was still seated at the back. She looked up from filing her nails. “Good lesson, Jesse. But you know you’ll have to correct that mistake you made about ‘simplifying’”.

OK, she was good. She hadn’t missed a thing.

“I especially liked the way you helped Michelle”.

“Uh, which Michelle?” I’d helped all of them.

“The one with the zit on her nose. I’m glad you pretended to ignore it ... she’s pretty sensitive about things like that”.

Well, apparently I’d done a good job. I left to prepare for grade eight science. Like, is this fun, or what?

But I really was having a good time. The rest of the week went well, considering that my knowledge of polynomials and cell structure was somewhat limited. I’m sure I’d learned all this stuff back in high school. But the textbooks were excellent, and with a little research, I was able to prepare some pretty good lessons.

I told Cole how it was going. “The kids are really not that bad. It’s been, like, a pretty good week!”

Great! Now I was starting to talk like them!

I knew where that came from. We’d noticed that my mother tended to take on the accent of people she was talking to.

We were in a restaurant once in the States, and the waitress had a really strong southern accent. “Well, honey, ah was wonderin’ if y’all would like some of thet wonderful chicken fried steak?”

My mother answered “Of course, darlin’. Y’all gowan and get us some of thet, y’hear?”

OK, I exaggerated a little. But not much.

Cole was very supportive. "That's great, honey!" I was pretty sure he'd heard what I said. I think.

So here I am continuing to teach lessons to Junior High students. There are only a few weeks left in my practicum. I'm pretty sure I'll get a good mark ... I've managed to teach all my lessons without interruptions ... although one of the Brookes did get a little angry with me once for mixing her up with one of the other Brookes.

And my supervising teacher liked my lesson plans.

But I'm looking forward to the end of the practicum. Junior High students wear me down. And I hope to maybe get a job teaching grade one or two next year.

I need some sanity back in my life. "Isn't that right, Cole?"

"Whatever you say, honey!"