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## George Washington's Teeth

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KILEY REID

## *George Washington's Teeth*

On the night before the first day of school, a video was released, and it began to circulate among the parents, teachers, and students of Baldwin Clap Elementary. The video featured Miss Korto, a fourth- and fifth-grade Social Studies teacher, and presented her as a finalist in the National Teacher of the Year Program. Claire Korto knew about the nomination, but it didn't seem real until the video began with short clips of her students.

"Miss Korto, she like, she doesn't talk to us like we're kids?" says a fifth-grader named Janelle. "She acts like we're just like...normal people, you know?"

"Miss Korto has a *lot* of energy," Daniel says. Claire fought the urge to reach through the screen and lift the unseen hand she knew was in his pants. "And her clothes are like, a million different colors but all at one time."

"Miss Korto is always telling us to put our big girl panties on!" Brianna yells. Claire swoons at her raspy voice. "And she always says, 'Meet me halfway on this.' And that you get what you get and you don't pitch a fit!"

Then there's a narrator's voice. Miss Korto is seen teaching up at a whiteboard, helping students individually, and high-fiving them as they exit her classroom. She wears large, clear-framed glasses and a dress that she once explained to her students was called dashiki.

At the end of the video is an outtake that makes Claire laugh. A third-grader named Noel explains the pronunciation of Miss Korto's last name to the cameraman. "It's African cause she's African and you say it like *cut-toe*. Like you cut your toe? Even though it doesn't look like that." The cameraman says, "Oh, OK, thank you," and Noel says, "You are very welcome." Claire was up against three other teachers. Two in Texas and one in Michigan.

Claire watched the video with Malik, her boyfriend of seven months, who announced that he was sharing it with his mother immediately. "This is huge, Claire," he said as he signed into his email. "Honestly, congratulations."

“In the last hour, I’ve received thirty-two emails,” Claire said, looking at her phone. “Who is this? I don’t even know a Denita Moore from Johns Hopkins but she is *very* excited for me.”

Malik nudged her with his knee. “Your first day back is going to be wild.”

On Monday morning, Claire had fifty-one more emails. There was a banner on her classroom door and yellow balloons taped to the sides of her desk. Throughout the day, she was congratulated and hugged by parents, students, teachers, and staff. A fourth-grader explained that if she won, she’d be on the *Ellen* show, and how she’d have to dance.

Claire texted pictures of the banner and balloons to Malik. Malik was a professor in the Africana Studies department at Drexel University. When he got out of class, he texted *I really hope a kid put those there and not you. See you tonight?* Claire grinned and typed *Yes*.

At 5:27 p.m., when Claire pushed Malik’s front door open, she heard him uncorking a bottle of wine. “Ohmygod,” he sang from the kitchen. “Is that Miss Korto from Baldwin Clap?”

But when Claire made her way into the kitchen, she set her bag on the counter, stared at the floor, and said, “Malik.”

“Your students had better step it up at Christmas this year.” He poured wine into a stemless glass. “Starbucks gift cards aren’t gonna cut it anymore—”

“Malik.”

Malik turned to her and readjusted his glasses. “Yeah, hi, what’s wrong?”

“I can’t even, umm...hi.” She touched the sides of her neck with flat fingers and clean, bare nails.

Malik put a hand on his dark, clipped hair. “Did something happen with the nomination?”

“No no no,” she shook her head. She stood next to the counter and slowly removed her heels. “Everyone was really nice. It’s not about that at all.”

“OK, then, what’s wrong?”

“You’re going to think I’m crazy, and very petty,” she said, “But you will not believe who just transferred into my class. Can I have that, please?”

Claire tipped back the white wine he poured. When she stopped, Malik said, "Well, hi."

"OK, just bear with me for a minute..." Claire swallowed. "Do you remember how I told you that I used to go to that white-girl camp in Vermont in the summer?"

Malik peeked into a steaming pot of mussels on the stove. Claire watched him remember their sixth or seventh date, and how she'd explained her time at camp while her parents divorced, once when she was nine, and another more permanent time when she was ten. "That was the name of it, right?" Malik asked. "White Girl Camp in Vermont in the Summer?"

"Basically. It was called Mohave Tripp Lake. And the Tripp had two p's."

Above the boiling pot, Malik looked both scared and impressed. "Damn," he said.

"I know. Anyway...so when we first got to camp we had to do swim trials to see what swimming group we'd be in. Everyone got into a group, but the girls who didn't pass got put on Swim Watch."

Malik looked up and said, "This is already my favorite thing you've ever told me."

Claire reached down and massaged her heel. "OK, so Swim Watch means you can only swim to the end of the dock. And you have to wear this big neon ribbon on the shoulder of your swimsuit so that the life-guards can keep an eye on you."

Malik considered these limitations. "That's not so bad, right? Safety first?"

"Well," Claire placed her hand on the counter, "there were only four girls, out of like, two hundred, who didn't pass swim trials. So guess which girls at Mohave Tripp Lake had to wear neon ribbons on the shoulders of their swimsuits?"

"Oh God." Malik set a ladle into the spoon rest on the stove. "All the black girls?"

"Mmhmm." Claire wrapped her locks into a messy hold at the top of her head and said, "All four of us."

"Oh noooo," Malik mourned. "I thought you were a decent swimmer."

"I am now," Claire mumbled. "I remember it was me, my sister, this big girl named Morgan, and this other African girl named Afua. I think they were there on scholarship...but anyway—"

"You mean Afia," Malik said, without looking at her.

Claire adjusted her glasses and said, “Hmm?”

“Was the other girl West African?”

Claire couldn’t remember but she said yes.

“Then, the name is *A-fia*, right?” Malik looked up. “Born on a Friday?”

Claire looked as if she’d swallowed something hot. She shook her head and said, “Born on a Friday is called *Afua*.”

“Uh uh,” he hummed lightly. “I think you might be wrong on this one.”

“OK, first of all, I’m right.” Claire’s eyes went large. “And second, my story is way more important than *Afua* who wasn’t even that nice and wore the same pair of socks for the *whole* summer.”

“All right all right.” Malik reached down and into the oven to remove toasted bread that bubbled on top. “So what happened? Did some kid wear a neon ribbon to class today?”

“No no no.” Claire flicked her fingers in the air. “OK, so back at camp...in my second year, the camp owner was there for her birthday. And they baked her a cake and we all sang some camp song and we ate the cake and that was that. But apparently, there was extra cake that they put in the kitchen, and two days later, someone stole it. *But*,” Claire flexed and pointed her foot toward the floor, “when they stole it, this girl named Heather Pacey was in the nurse’s room. And the nurse’s room had a window where you could see to the back of the kitchen. So the next day, when the counselors asked whoever stole the cake to come forward, Heather Pacey told them that she’d seen someone leaving the kitchen with the cake.”

“Wait.” Malik licked salt from the space between his thumb and pointer finger. “Sorry but why would the counselors care if someone stole a cake? It’s not like they could get it back.”

“I remember it was more about the pan that the cake was in...?” Claire trailed off. She laughed at how serious this had seemed at the time. “They like...really wanted the pan back.”

“Right right, the pan,” Malik smiled. “OK, keep going.”

Claire picked up her wine glass again. “So the counselors asked Heather Pacey what the girl looked like. Heather said she didn’t see her face, but that whoever took it had a neon ribbon on her swimsuit shoulder.”

“Oh shit,” Malik grinned. “I love how that’s camp jargon for *black kid*. Like, ‘Well, I don’t want to make any assumptions, but she had a neon ribbon *if you know what I mean*.’”

“Malik...” Claire stood with her left-hand fingers all outstretched. “They called the four of us into the office, put us in a lineup, and asked Heather which one of us stole the cake.”

“Jesus Christ,” Malik laughed. He put his hands at his hips and said, “Did they ask each of you to run with a pan in your hands so Heather could be sure it was you?”

“No, they did not.”

“I’m kidding.” He poked her leg with his big toe. “What did Heather Pacey have to say?”

“Heather said she wasn’t sure, and then she started crying, and then they let her go.”

“Man, what a weenie.”

“But that’s not even the worst part.” Claire reached for the wine bottle and Malik said, “*Dang* girl,” in a way that made her squirm with affection for him. “Get this though,” she said as she poured. “Before all this happened, Heather and I were actually kind of friends. She was a couple years older than me, but when the cake was being served, Heather was sitting next to me. And when the counselors offered cake, I said no, thank you. And I remember Heather eating hers, and licking frosting off of her plate. And she asked me, ‘Do you not like cake?’ and I said, ‘I just like brownies better.’ And I remember this because she said, ‘Me too, have you ever had blondies?’ but then the whistle blew and I didn’t get to answer.”

Above the sink, Malik strained the mussel liquid through fresh cheesecloth. His hands trembled with the weight of the pot. “Claire, how do you even remember all of this?”

“Because I do!” Claire slapped the counter. “And Heather knew. She *knew* I didn’t even like cake.”

“But you do like cake.”

Claire held up a finger. “But she saw me not take it when I could have had it. Why would I steal a cake that I didn’t want two days before?”

“I know, I get it.” He began to divide the shells into two deep plates.

“She knew I didn’t do it and she just stood there.” Claire looked at the tile floor. “She could have said something. Anything. How am I drunk right now?”

“Because you are *downing this thing*,” Malik laughed. “I’m gonna top you off with some spritzer, miss.”

“My point is,” Claire said, “Heather Pacey knew I didn’t steal that cake.”

Malik closed the refrigerator. "So she didn't say you stole it."

"No."

"But she didn't say that you didn't steal it."

"Exactly," Claire pointed. "And you know what? Being complicit in the bad thing is just as bad as doing the bad thing, which is what I tell my students, which is why I'm a fucking finalist for *Teacher of the Year*."

"Woowww," Malik said as he poured sparkling water into her wine glass. "I can't wait for the tragic biopic on your Teacher of the Year downfall."

"Honestly though, it was super shitty, and I cried myself to sleep about it more than once."

"Did you get in trouble?"

"No." Claire stared at the back of her right hand. "But it made us look bad, or worse, I guess. I could just tell that some of the counselors thought I was a thief, you know? And that's why I started swimming more, so I wouldn't have to wear a ribbon, and by the end of the summer, I was the fastest girl in the beginner group."

"That's possibly the saddest thing I've ever heard you say."

"It's not sad," Claire shook her head. "I got a certificate for most improved!"

"You're not really helping your case here, Korto." Malik opened a drawer for two stained but clean cloth napkins. "While that was an amazing story of adolescence and the lasting effects of segregated swimming pools," he said, "I'm not sure how that affected your first day back."

"Ohmygod, yes." Claire remembered the reason she began this story. "Because today I got two new students in my fifth-grade class. And I ask this girl what her name is..." Claire took a dramatic pause, "And she says, *Anna Pacey-Greene*."

Malik gasped and placed a hand to his chest. "But wait," he said, "I thought the girl's name was Heather Pacey."

"It's Heather's *daughter*," Claire overpronounced.

"Right right right, I knew that," Malik smiled. "And I'm guessing she's an awful, horrible, completely complicit child?"

"No." Claire leaned her back against the counter. "That's the worst part; I kinda like her. She's really cute and she's got this weird, fucked-up hair. Like she tried to give herself bangs."

"You're positive this is Heather Pacey's kid?"

“Yes,” Claire winced. “Because I might have possibly asked her.”

Malik laughed and said, “Smooth, Korto.”

“I had to, she looks just like her. And it wasn’t that weird,” Claire assured him. “I said, ‘Is your mom’s name Heather?’ And she was like, ‘Yes. My mother’s name is Heather and she’s thirty-five and my dad’s name is Hank and he’s thirty-seven.’”

“What a weirdo,” Malik said. “No wonder you like her.”

Claire said, “I know.” She set her wine glass down, held her fingers behind her back. “I remember being so upset, because I *never* got in trouble. I was just like, *Wait wait wait, this is silly, there must be some mistake*. No one even asked me where I was when it was stolen.”

“That sounds awful,” Malik walked to Claire and placed his hands on her elbows, “. . .but I can’t say I’m surprised.” He rubbed the back of her neck with his thumbs. “Do you think this is some kind of test you have to pass? Be nice to the mean girl’s kid to be Teacher of the Year?”

“Oh, please,” she laughed. “At Mohave Tripp Lake we learned to make new friends and keep the old. This smells delicious.” Claire touched Malik’s sides, said, “Let’s eat all of it,” and kissed his shoulder.

Over the next week, Claire made three public appearances. One as a judge in a local dog contest, another as a host in a bar trivia night, and one on the local news. Claire had four articles written about her, one in a national publication that also featured her competitors. She was recognized at the grocery store and was given a car wash for free, and Malik’s mother sent a small bouquet of daisies that was delivered to her classroom. Claire found herself at the drycleaners twice in one week. Everyone wanted to talk about the nomination, which was a nice change from saying she was doing the same curriculum for the fourth year in a row, but her mouth was starting to hurt from smiling. Before classes started, Claire wiped lotion around the dry corners of her lips.

In the second week of school, Claire stood in front of her fifth grade Social Studies class with a cardboard box holding twenty-two scraps of paper. On each piece was a historical misconception. One scrap read *Christopher Columbus proved the world was round*. Another read *The Vikings were the first to wear horns on their helmets*. The

students were to create three-minute presentations on the misconception and correct it with facts. When Claire explained the assignment to Malik, he laughed and said, “OK, Miss Teacher of the Year.”

But then, for the second day in a row, Anna Pacey-Greene had red eyes and a pasty hue on her face. She didn’t raise her hand to participate, or when the class voted on what song to play during break. As Anna left the room, Claire touched her back in a way that she hoped meant *I’m here but I’ll also leave you alone*. As the last bell rang, Claire was both shocked and expectant when Heather Pacey arrived at her classroom door.

“Are you Miss Korto?” Heather held her purse to her body. “I’m sorry, *Cut-Toe?*”

Claire held the doorknob of her classroom as her last student exited the room. She looked at Heather’s face, recognized her immediately, and said, “Yes, I am.”

“Hi, I’m Anna’s mom, Heather.” Heather stuck out her hand. “Do you have a minute?”

Claire said, “Of course,” and let Heather inside.

Heather was a small woman with thin, brown hair, and soft skin in the space below her armpits. She was sweet-looking, and she seemed smart in a way that would surprise you, as if she was fluent in Italian or good at doing her family’s taxes. Heather was the definition of plain, but she was also that nice woman from your book club, or the mom you always wave to at the gym. Claire relaxed into the fact that Heather had most likely seen the Teacher of the Year video. She waited for her to talk about camp.

“I’m usually very good about meeting Anna’s teachers,” Heather said. Claire sat behind her desk and Heather slid into a chair at the front row. “But we just moved here six weeks ago and the house is finally starting to look like a house.”

“Unpacking always takes about twice as long as you think it-”

“Ohmygod,” Heather put a hand to her mouth. She blinked three times, squinted, and said, “Wait...I know you from somewhere.”

Claire’s heart quickened. She’d been prepared to say *Yes, Heather, I remember you too*, but not ready to feign surprise. Claire tried her best to say, “Oh, really?” with an honest, relaxed intrigue, but everything within her was saying *Let’s not do this*.

“Ohmygod,” Heather laughed. “You’re going to think I’m crazy, but did you go to a summer camp in Vermont when you were little? Mo-have Tripp? Spelled with two p’s?”

“Wow.” Claire looked down into her lap. This was what she was meant to do, yes? Heather was acting shocked, so she had to copy? Claire smiled and said, “That’s a name I haven’t heard in about twenty years. Yes, I did go there.”

“I remember you!” Heather snapped her fingers. “I was older than you but I definitely remember you. You had long braids back then, right?”

“I did,” Claire nodded. “Did you have that counselor with the shaved head?”

“Yep!” Heather couldn’t stop laughing. Claire examined her face and thought *So this is how we’re going to do this*. She waited for Heather to suddenly “remember” the cake incident too, and for her to apologize. Claire readied herself to say *The past is the past* or maybe *We were so young*. Any trite phrase that would absolve Heather and move them on to Anna. But Heather crossed her legs out of the side of the desk and smiled dreamily with all of her teeth. “I loved that camp,” she went on. “When I got married, a girl from my bunk was one of my bridesmaids.”

“Oh, really, who was she?”

“Well, we don’t speak anymore, it was so long ago,” Heather waved her hand in the air. “I’m sorry, but that is just crazy that you and I went to the same summer camp.”

“It is,” Claire said. Her mouth was starting to ache from smiling again. “Will Anna be going to camp this summer?”

“No. Well...I don’t know yet.” Heather turned grave and held her purse in her lap with both hands. “I guess it depends on how many things she has going on but...anyway, I don’t know if you’ve seen how upset Anna’s been lately.”

“I have.” Claire sat forward on her desk and held her biceps. “I’m glad you came in; is she all right?”

“Oh, she’s fine. Anna’s always fine, she’s just very sensitive. But I do have one request for the presentation she’s doing in your class.”

“The Teacher for a Day assignment?”

“Yes, and let me just say,” Heather bent at the hip, “I love the idea. And in any other case, I think Anna would jump all over this but...the topic she was assigned is fairly graphic. She’s actually spent the last two

nights crying herself to sleep over it. And my husband and I have tried to console her, but she just cannot seem to get past it.”

As Heather said this, Claire reached into her desk to pull out a folder titled *Social Studies // 5th Grade // 5th Period*. She opened it to a paper-clipped page and her eyes scrolled down to the last names beginning with P’s. Written next to *Anna Pacey-Greene* was the title of her historical misconception: *George Washington’s teeth were made out of wood*.

“And, believe me, ‘You get what you get and you don’t pitch a fit’ is a phrase we say in our house too.” Heather smiled, and for a moment, Claire thought *So you have seen the video*. “But I just don’t think the topic is a good one for her right now.

She just moved, she has to make new friends...and for some reason, this is just very hard for her to handle.”

Claire stared at Heather’s face so hard that she had to blink herself out of it and focus on the notebook beneath her. Since she’d arrived, Claire had been considering all the things that must have happened to Heather since she came to the Mohave Tripp Office, cried in front of four black girls, and said *I don’t know* when asked who was the thief. In the time since then, Heather had most likely attended college. She’d learned how to drive and she’d bought her own coffee. Maybe, one time, she’d complained to a manager. Maybe she’d had a miscarriage. Maybe her friend had cancer. There were countless instances that could have shaped and changed Heather since that summer, but somehow, sitting in a children’s desk in front of Claire Korto, Heather Pacey was the same crying girl, asking to be excused.

Claire made a confused, kissing sound with her lips. She sat back in her seat and put her hands on both armrests. “I’m sorry, Heather. I’m just not sure what you’re asking.”

“I’m not asking that she doesn’t do the assignment!” Heather laughed nervously and went on. “No no no. I just think the content she was assigned is a bit too much for her right now. And I’m happy to help find another topic that she can teach to the class.”

Claire tapped her pointer fingers against the chair. She could think of at least three other misconceptions Anna could correct (*Albert Einstein once failed math. Marco Polo invented pasta. Ben Franklin discovered electricity when his kite was struck by lightning*) but she couldn’t bring herself to name them. Instead, Claire dipped her head to the side and asked, “Can you explain why this topic is too much for Anna to handle?”

Heather laughed again. "I think we can agree that it's fairly graphic."

"Has she told you about other topics we've covered in Social Studies? We've mentioned slavery a few times, and we will more during Black History Month."

"Oh, yes!" Heather raised her hands to praise this point. "Please know that I *want* Anna to study slavery. It's so important for her to understand the history of this country; that's not the problem at all. It's just the graphic nature of *this* specific topic."

Claire adjusted her voice and tried not to smile. "Anna will see pictures of whipped slaves, in this class," she pointed at her desk. "In her textbook there are pictures of white children standing next to lynched, black bodies. So with all due respect, Heather, if Anna can handle pictures of murdered slaves, I think she can handle knowing that George Washington's teeth came from them too."

"Miss Korto, I understand your point." Heather folded her hands in surrender. "I do. And I'm so thankful that she is receiving an in-depth education...but my child is crying every night." She pressed her lips in a way that implied she might start crying. "You know better than I do how children can become fixated on something, and Anna has become completely obsessed with the idea that George Washington took these teeth from slaves who were very much alive. And I've assured her that he did not but this idea just keeps circling around in her head and—"

"I'm sorry..." Claire stopped her. "You told Anna that George Washington's teeth came from *dead* slaves?"

Heather placed her knuckles to her chin. "Well, you don't think that teeth were taken from slaves who were alive, do you?"

Claire looked out the classroom window. She felt her tongue at the roof of her mouth and sweat forming beneath her bra. No, she didn't think that these teeth came from live slaves. George Washington was documented purchasing nine Negro teeth for 122 shillings, and he wasn't the first to do so. When Claire truly considered doctors removing teeth from live slaves, she found it unlikely, not just because of the health of the slave, but the preference and safety of the doctor taking them. But Claire did not say this to Heather, and she knew she would never say it to Anna either.

"That's not for me to say," she said to the window. Claire looked back to Heather and said, "I honestly don't know."

“All right, wait,” Heather exhaled. She picked up her thin brown hair and threw it behind her shoulders. “I’m probably not using the right words here. Miss Korto, I don’t mean to offend you at all in my request. Is it all right if we start over?”

This sent a cramp through Claire’s chest. Heather appeared both clever and very sorry. Claire knew that she had to say something about that summer at camp. That once it was out in the open she would be able to move on. That they would find an option that would satisfy both of them, and, most importantly, mollify Anna. “I don’t mean to offend either,” Claire said. Her voice was different now, and much more her. “Heather...I know that we have a difficult history, and I just want to say that—”

“Oh, Miss Korto, it’s a terrible history!” Heather interrupted. “And I don’t mean to make light of how African Americans were treated in this country, because it was completely deplorable!”

Claire pressed her lips together. It was Heather’s insistence on how terrible this injustice was that made Claire certain that she remembered the cake. Claire smiled and waited for Heather to go on.

“If it’s really not possible to switch the topic that Anna was assigned,” Heather chuckled at this premise, “then, all right. But Miss Korto... meet me halfway on this. Anna *adores* you. Everyone does, you know that by now. If you could please talk to her and just get this picture out of her head so she can move on with the assignment and the rest of her studies, her dad and I would greatly appreciate it.”

There was something in Heather’s claim that she would *greatly appreciate it* that went into Claire’s gut and made her pulse double. In Claire’s seven years of teaching she’d had one altercation with a parent, and that mother had an alcohol addiction and her children were now in custody of the state. Claire bit her bottom lip and her eyes fell on a drawing a second-grader had delivered the day before. It showed Claire standing with flowers and a trophy, her glasses taking up most of her face, and it read *Teacher of the Year!* Claire folded her hands on top of her desk.

“So for starters, this topic wasn’t assigned *to* Anna,” Claire grinned. “The class drew slips of paper and this was the topic that Anna picked out. Second, I did not make up the information that she found on this topic. If George Washington’s teeth had been made from metal or glass or anything else, I still would have included it in the list of misconceptions because it is a misconception. And *of course* I don’t want Anna

to be upset; that's the last thing I want for any of my students. But the reason I love this project is because I think that when children get to teach something, the topic becomes real for them. And that sounds exactly like what is happening to Anna."

Heather's eyes turned small and the room went very quiet. "Miss Korto," she said. "Anna is ten years old. This content is disturbing for a child to digest."

"I understand that," Claire said. "But I think it's even scarier to think of Anna as a young woman who hasn't digested what slavery was then, and what it means for people of color now."

"But she's not a young woman, she's *ten*." Heather's voice became shrill and desperate. "I'm raising a *ten-year-old*, and if this topic was a movie, I would never let her watch it."

"Anna is in my fifth-grade Social Studies curriculum," Claire said, "which means she will study the Holocaust and the Trail of Tears and Pearl Harbor *and* slavery. I would be doing a *huge* disservice to my students if I tailored our country's history to their parents' comfort levels."

Heather stood up and said, "Wow." Her mouth stayed open as she slung the strap of her purse over her shoulder. Claire looked down at her freckled knees. "Miss Korto," Heather said, "these children adore you. You don't have to do things like this to be *Teacher of the Year*."

Claire's forehead wrinkled. "What exactly am I doing?"

"You don't have to take a political stance if it comes at the cost of your students."

Claire stayed seated but pushed her chair away from her desk. "This conversation began with you telling me that Anna is very sensitive, and that she's always fine. If that's true, which it sounds like it is, then the topic Anna received is the perfect one for her."

Claire listened to Heather's flats disappear down the hallway. She gripped the bottom of her seat and her pinky fingers tapped lightly against the wood. In the minutes after Heather left the room, Claire became slightly troubled at her own thought process. Her focus was not *If Heather remembered the cake, why wouldn't she say sorry?* Rather, *If Heather saw the video, why wouldn't she say congratulations?*

"She wanted you to change the kid's assignment?"

Malik and Claire were at Claire's apartment. She had texted that she

was too angry to cook, and he asked her what kind of sushi she would like. On Claire's drive home, it started to rain.

"She said the assignment was too much for precious little Anna to handle," Claire said. "I lost it, Malik. I completely let her have it. And she had the audacity to tell me that if I wanted to be Teacher of the Year, I didn't have to take a political stance."

Malik took off his jacket and said, "Damn."

"I honestly don't think I took a breath the entire time." Claire reached for the windowsill by the tiny kitchen table and cracked it open. It drizzled outside, but the apartment was growing humid. Claire stood by the breeze. "I know she remembers that cake," she said. "And I tried to bring it up but she wouldn't have it."

"You did?"

"Yes! I said, 'Heather, I know we have a difficult history,' and she was like, 'I know! Slavery is just the worst!'"

"You're sure she didn't just forget?"

Claire lowered into her seat. Malik did this sometimes—this borderline condescending doubt—and it drove her nuts. She looked into his eyes and said, "There's no way she forgot."

"Well, it sounds like she's still a huge weenie, but you also remember a lot of things that I wouldn't." Malik ripped the wrapping on his chopsticks and began to slide them against each other. "So she just got pissed off and left?"

"First she pulled this 'meet me halfway' shit." Claire shook her head. She held her glass of water with both hands. "She asked me to tell Anna that George Washington didn't take the teeth from live slaves because that's the part that's really bothering her."

"Wait, what?" Malik chewed slowly in front of her. He laughed a bit and said, "She thinks they ripped teeth from slaves who were alive?"

"Evidently, that's what's making her cry herself to sleep at night."

Malik dropped his napkin in his lap and his eyebrows came together. "Whoa whoa whoa," he said. "This kid's crying herself to sleep? I thought she was just complaining."

"She's *ten*." Claire stirred wasabi into her soy sauce. "Crying for ten year olds is like sneezing. I had a girl cry yesterday because the peace sign she drew apparently 'sucked.'"

"But wait." Malik rubbed his eyes. When Malik disagreed with Claire, his mouth recoiled, as if he'd seen something that turned his stomach.

She recognized this mouth now, and she avoided his eyes. Claire waited patiently for Malik to be on her side. “This girl is crying every night,” he clarified, “because George Washington bought teeth from slaves?”

“Correct.”

“And her mother asked if she could not do the assignment, and you said no.”

Claire talked with sushi in her cheek. “She can do the assignment or she can take a fail.”

“And when her mom asked you to explain to her child that these teeth were not from live Negroes, you said no?”

“Well,” Claire finished chewing and she placed her hands on the table, “I can’t possibly know for certain.”

“Claire, come on,” Malik said louder, but he was still smiling. “For so many reasons they were not from live slaves.”

“OK, name two.” Claire felt strange about Malik coming to this realization so quickly, but then she remembered that this was in fact his job. But Claire *wasn’t* there. How could she possibly know? And neither was Malik. How could he be so certain?

“Well, for starters,” Malik held up his thumb, “Slave owners can’t just go ripping teeth out and expect them to work as they had before.”

“So whipping a slave was apropos but pulling teeth was not?”

“A whipped slave can still eat,” Malik said. “If they can’t eat, they can’t work.”

Claire crossed her legs. “OK, fine.”

“And second,” he held up his pointer finger, “I’m assuming George Washington wanted teeth that were the same color and shape, so he’d have to get them from the same person. At that time you couldn’t take all of a person’s teeth without having them bleed to death.”

“OK, Malik.” Claire poked at a salmon roll. “That all makes sense, but I’m going off of the facts that I have. The only secure facts state that George Washington purchased nine—”

“Claire, I know what the facts are.” Malik stopped her with an abruptness that left her lips parted. “It just sounds like this girl is having a loss-of-innocence breakdown.”

Claire mumbled a noise that acknowledged she’d heard him.

They were quiet for a moment. Raindrops splashed inches away from Claire’s sushi and the refrigerator behind her started to purr. Just as she was about to ask if he wanted some wine, and mention the fact that

Harriet Tubman was chosen to grace the twenty-dollar bill, Malik looked up and said, “You’re going to talk to this kid tomorrow, right?”

“OK, you know what, Malik?” Claire exhaled aggressively out of her nose. “No, I’m not. I’m sorry but this girl is not special for crying two nights in a row.”

“Claire, seriously?” Malik’s eyebrows were halfway up his forehead. “Jesus, if one of my students cried—no—if one of my *white* students cried,” he corrected, “because of the cruelty blacks once faced in America, I’d be beside myself. I’d be so happy that *I’d* probably cry. That alone would make me Teacher of the Year.”

Claire put her chopsticks down. “So you’re gonna throw that in my face now, too?”

Malik tried again. “I’m just saying that what you have is an absolute dream. Honestly, this country would be a better place if more kids had the reaction that this girl is having right now. And you did that. You found a way to talk about oppression without getting her all riled up about privilege and what not, and you made things click for her. Honestly, you probably changed her life. So now, I think you can pull her back in a bit.”

“Pull her back in?” Claire squinted as she leaned across the table. “Anna got grossed out by slave teeth and now you want me to *pull her back in*? Into what? Oblivion?”

“OK, listen. Let’s say you and I had a kid.” Malik reached his hand across the table and it stayed there as he spoke. “And they heard that Santa Claus wasn’t real and got really upset. If they came to me, I’d say, ‘Hey, Santa is real if you want it to be real.’ Because he’ll learn soon enough. He’ll eventually get it on his own and—”

“Santa Claus is *not* slavery!” Claire screamed. “If you think I’m going to lie to my students and say that the bad stuff doesn’t have to be real just because it isn’t fun, then you are out of your mind. And you teach African American studies? How fucking dare you?”

“When did I ask you to lie to her? Claire!”

Claire had gotten up. She sealed the plastic lid on top of her sushi and tossed it into the refrigerator.

“OK, just wait a second.”

“I need to go for a walk.”

“A walk?” Malik stood. “What does that even mean?”

Claire didn’t really know. They’d never done this before. But Malik’s

conviction was completely stifling. She stared at his face and said, “It means I need to go *for a walk*.”

“Claire,” he sighed. She walked to the front door and he followed close behind her. “Maybe that was a stupid analogy, but that’s not what I’m asking you to do.”

She stepped into her shoes. “Then what exactly are you asking me to do?”

“To remember that this is a child, even though she’s Heather Pacey’s!”

Claire turned. From deep in her hips she said, “This has nothing to do with her.”

“Oh, all right,” Malik laughed. “So you truly don’t know if George Washington’s teeth were taken dead or alive?”

“I wasn’t there, so no.”

“Even though through deductive reasoning, you think they were taken when the slaves were dead, you still want to tell this crying kid that you don’t know?”

Claire reached for her jacket. She slipped it over her shoulders and wiped a tear from her face. “Malik, when I told you about that summer at camp,” she found her purse and keys, “I told you that I cried myself to sleep on multiple occasions. And I just wish that you’d had an *ounce* of the same reaction that you do right now when it’s a little white girl who doesn’t like her homework.”

“That’s completely unfair—”

Claire reached for the door.

“And you know what else is unfair?” Malik spoke to the back of her head. “You thinking that your lineage gives you the last word on everything African.”

But Claire was already gone.

As she walked down the sidewalk, as if she had somewhere to be, Claire thought *Is this what I would do if we lived together?* She ducked her head and began to jog through the mist.

As her feet hit the pavement, Claire realized that she’d never even considered her future children believing in Santa Claus. Somewhere in her subconscious, she’d always assumed they wouldn’t.

On the morning of the Teacher for a Day presentations, Anna cried so hard that she had an asthma attack. Another student was giving

his presentation on America's real Independence Day, September 3rd, 1783, when Anna, who was "on deck," turned a light shade of red. She cried into the neckline of her long-sleeved T-shirt. Her violent hiccups rattled the desk.

Claire tried to focus on the current presentation until it was finished. She said, "Thank you, Matthew!" as she walked to the back of the classroom. "We're going to take a small break and Matthew gets to pick the song we listen to." Claire took Anna from underneath her right armpit and whispered, "Let's go outside."

Claire led Anna into the hall and outside to a small set of stairs leading down to the basketball courts. Anna held her inhaler in front of her chest and tried to stop crying.

"Deep breaths," Claire said. She sat down with Anna and rubbed her back. "You wanna breathe all your air out before you try your inhaler, OK?"

Anna nodded and stared straight ahead.

Claire remembered sitting between her mother's knees on a green plastic stool and crying this way: breathy and brutal and practically wild. Her mother refused to relax her hair, but she also refused to learn to comb through it without causing Claire intense pain, the breakage of Claire's hair, and the snap of some combs. That all changed when Claire discovered braids, and that she could have this pain only five times a year. In her third year of college, Claire decided five times was too much. When she returned home for Christmas with her dark brown hair in skinny-plaited locks, her mother looked at her and said, "Let's just hope you can get a job with those things."

Claire looked down at Anna and said, "We're going to pick another topic for you."

Anna sniffed viciously. "But everyone's gonna know I pitched a fit!"

"No, they aren't." Claire pulled her knees to her chest. "I'll explain that the facts for your topic were a little complicated, and how you helped me figure that out."

Anna nodded and inhaled doubly.

"Hey." Claire bent her head lower. "You can present a new topic to just me, OK? I'll send a note home for your mom and you'll be Teacher for a Day but just with me. But Anna, sometimes...sometimes we learn things that make us cry, and you know what? That's totally OK."

Anna wiped her face with the back of her hand. “Does this make you cry?”

“Your topic?”

“Uh huh.”

“No...” Claire said carefully. “But there are other things that make me cry.”

“But I just feel like...” Anna’s voice cracked. “Like, you have really nice teeth, you know? So they for sure would have taken yours...” This started a new onslaught of tears.

“All right Anna, shhhh,” Claire cooed. She placed an arm around her shoulders. Anna bent and cried into Claire’s thigh.

Claire Korto did not win the title of Teacher of the Year. The winning Texas teacher appeared on *Ellen*, *CNN*, *Good Morning America*, and most likely a dozen more shows. Claire made herself stop Googling the winning teacher around 2 a.m. “Y’all, I’m honestly just so thrilled to be here,” the woman gushed, “But I’m also really missing ma kids!” Claire said, “Jesus Christ,” and closed her laptop. She lay in bed and stared at the ceiling.

Anna agreed to stay after school and deliver her replacement presentation to Claire in her classroom. Claire waited at her desk and held her phone between her knees. She had one text from her mother, one from a teacher who was out sick, and two from Malik. *Hi*, his first text said. The second said, *When are you done today?*

Claire texted back. *I have a meeting right now but it should be fast. Dinner?*

The response came quickly. *Actually, can we meet at that park by your apt?*

Staring at this text from Malik, Claire felt her stomach move into her chest. It was a hollow, high-school feeling that she’d once imagined she’d be done with by now. Anna knocked on the doorframe and Claire clicked her phone’s screen to darkness.

“Hi, come on in,” Claire said. She squeezed the space behind her knees.

“Hiii,” Anna sang sheepishly. She placed her backpack on her desk at the back of the room, even though there were no other students, and then made her way back to Claire.

“You ready?” Claire grinned.

“Yeah ummm.” Anna raised her hands nervously. She set a foiled tin on top of Claire’s desk. “Umm, first I just wanted to say thank you for changing my topic.”

“You’re welcome, Anna.”

“And umm...” Anna giggled. “You went to camp with my mom, right?”

“Yes, I did.”

“That’s *really* weird,” Anna told her.

“It is,” Claire agreed. “She looked a lot like you.”

“That’s what everyone says,” Anna sighed. “But yeah, umm, I wanted to say thank you, so I made you these.” Anna messily unwrapped a corner of the foiled tin container. “My mom said she remembered that you liked brownies so...” She stuck her hands behind her back. “They’re from a box but I still made them myself.”

“Wow,” Claire nodded. She bit the side of her mouth and slid her hands between her crossed legs. “Wow,” she said again. “That was very thoughtful of you and your mom. Thank you very much, Anna.”

“You’re welcome.” Anna did a strange little curtsy and pushed her hair out of her face.

“You ready?” Claire sat back in her seat.

“Yep! OK, let me get my stuff.” Anna opened a yellow folder.

Claire stared out the window and continued to nod in a tiny, robotic rhythm. She reached up, smoothed the skin at the corners of her mouth, and told herself to breathe.

As Anna delivered her presentation on Albert Einstein, and how he actually did not fail math, Claire was back in Vermont. She was standing at the shore, holding her Most Improved certificate, and trying not to get it wet. For the last day of swimming Claire didn’t wear a ribbon on her swimsuit. She cannon-balled into the dark water and she swam far out, past the dock and the shadows of the trees. But when Claire looked back, most of the girls were standing in the shallow end. Everyone was exchanging addresses and all the lifeguards were sitting in the shade, saying how they couldn’t believe that summer was almost over.

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