



Lessons

for the students who remind me why I love to teach

Gazing into the sea of blank faces, I sense but don't recognize the anger oozing through me. Instead, I focus on them—their deliberate apathy. For two weeks, I've tried every strategy I know to bring my composition students into class discussions. But they're silent. I begin to question their motives: They're trying to needle me. And today, they're succeeding.

"All right. If you don't want to learn, I'm not going to waste my time trying to teach you. Why don't you just break into groups and do . . . whatever you want." I throw up my hands and realize, with horror, that I've spoken the words out loud.

Movement. Shuffling. The students pull out their notebooks and ease into comfortable conversation with each other. I don't understand. Why are their peers safe when I'm not? Why are they afraid to talk in front of me?

Melissa flags her hand at me. "I'm having trouble with my thesis statement." Relieved at the diversion, I slide into the empty chair at her table and ask what she's got so far. "I want to write about this photograph, but I can't narrow it down."

I turn to the other students at the table. "What questions do you have as audience members? What do you want to know?"

Tom looks at Melissa tentatively and asks why the photograph is important to her. She tells him that it brings her good memories. I nod toward Celia, who

pauses then asks Melissa how she feels when she looks at the picture. “It makes me happy.” Melissa turns toward me, confused.

How I can help her look beneath the surface, give her permission to explore? This shouldn’t be so hard. “Okay, Melissa. I don’t mean to sound harsh, but I’m thinking, ‘So what?’”

She blinks, releasing a fat teardrop that meanders down her cheekbone. She tries to brush it away, but before she does, another tear betrays her. And then I get it: I’m the person who will batter their egos, the person who will torture them.

I have become Sister Florentine.



I hate Tuesdays. I hate watching the hands move on the round, wall clock. I wish I could tear those hands off so no one would know what time it was. That way, no one could tell me it was time for my piano lesson. But I can’t, so I sit in my desk and pretend I’m memorizing multiplication tables—not praying that the bell won’t ring in 10, 9, 8 seconds, 7, 6, 5. It rings, screaming that everyone but me and Joan has music class now. We put our books in our desks, pull out our piano folders, and slowly walk to the door, hoping someone will stop us. No one does. We creep into the hall and down the stairs, where we usually talk and laugh. But not on Tuesdays, when the cement walls and gray, tiled floors lead us to Sister Florentine.

With each step, me and Joan slow down more. She’s waiting for us. The butterflies in my stomach turn into snakes. Coiling and uncoiling, they hiss and slither inside of me until we arrive at Sister Florentine’s dungeon. I raise my hand and knock on the door softly, praying that today she won’t answer. She’s old, after all. Maybe she’s dead. Maybe she’s lying all blue on the floor of her office. Even though I know it’s a sin, I hope she is.

But Sister Florentine opens the door with her blue hair poking out of her habit. I can't stand to look at her little stick-person body or her veiny hands that pull open the door. She squeaks at us, "Come in, girls," like the rusty old coffin she belongs in. Me and Joan tiptoe into her office and try to stay away from the piano.

"Cheryl, you go first this week."

Joan stares at her shoes. I climb onto the piano bench and try to stop my hands from shaking when I pull the music from my folder. "Born Free." I like the song, so I practiced even when my mom didn't tell me to. I've gotten pretty good at it, I think. Maybe I'm afraid for nothing.

Carefully, carefully I begin to play. I hit the right keys, but my playing doesn't feel the same as it did at home. My fingers feel fat and clumsy. Too slow. I try to play faster, but my stupid finger lands on the wrong note. I continue to play, praying she didn't hear.

"EEEEeee?" She screams. She moves fast for an old nun, and I can feel her breath on my neck. Reaching over my shoulder, she grabs my middle finger with her claws and slams it repeatedly onto the right note. My finger throbs, and the tip turns purple. Before I can stop it, a big, fat tear drops from my eye right onto the piano keys. Sister Florentine makes me look stupid, like a baby crying in front of my friend.



Today I face my students again. I sit on a desk and dangle my legs as I gaze into their tense faces. I no longer believe they're trying to torture me; they want to learn without stumbling or being shamed. "Today, I wore my aunt Idy's earrings," I tell them. "And I want to write a paper about them. Today, I'm the student, and you're the teacher." I pause for a moment and smile at them. "I want you to help me write a thesis statement." Their faces register relief. Curiosity. And then they join me.

One student asks why I'd want to write a paper about earrings. Another wonders why they're important. Melissa almost whispers, "What kind of person was Idy?"

At first, I tease my students with vague responses, but their engagement increases. Mine does, too. I lapse into the story of a blue-haired woman gentler than Sister Florentine. In fragments, I tell them of my tiny great-aunt who used to invite me onto her narrow lap that fit me like an overstuffed chair, how I could sit there for hours, talking, listening, wrapped in the warmth of Aunt Idy's arms. Back then, I was fascinated by the earrings that flashed in her lobes, so much a part of her that I thought they grew in her ears. The tiny diamonds nestled in the center of the earrings sparkled as I told Aunt Idy my stories.

Carl raises his hand and asks if he can see one of the earrings. I remove one and place it in his open palm. Delicately, he rolls the earring between his thumb and forefinger. The rambunctious teenager who regularly disrupts class becomes thoughtful, exploring the filigreed gold and the diamond's many facets. I suspect he's thinking about the story, too. "Thank you," he says, and gingerly returns the earring to me. "Did she give them to you?"

"My mother did when Aunt Idy died." Their eyes widen, but I don't let them grieve for her. I describe her alive so they can see her take my hand and wander through the yard with me, seeking each of my cats. I tell them how I crawled over tree stumps and peeked into the cats' favorite hiding places, and Aunt Idy never returned to her lawn chair in the shade until we found them. Then, she would bend at the waist and scratch each one behind the ears while I explained their personalities and hunting achievements. I tell my students that Aunt Idy listened to me, even though I was only a little kid. She made me feel like my stories mattered.

Today, my students don't stare blankly. And, as I tell them about Aunt Idy, Sister Florentine fades. I open myself to the lessons my students are teaching me and fondly remember the lessons I've already learned as I turn one of Aunt Idy's earrings in my hand.

—Cheryl Gfrerer, *English Instructor*