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From Math and Science to Writing

“So I messed up,” Ms. Taylor, the principal, said. Her voice was confident, almost cheerful. “You’ll be teaching math and science instead.”

I stared at her. I was sitting in her office, my newly purchased Mary Janes pressing into the soft red carpet. I had it all planned: I’d show my students how to relate to Jane Eyre even though she lives in the nineteenth century with no i-Phones and no Internet, how to sympathize with Gregor Samsa, even though he transforms into an insect. The academic year was about to begin and I was ready to teach literature. “But you hired me to teach English,” I said quietly, almost in a whisper. My heart was racing. I was still hoping Ms. Taylor was joking. Testing me. She wants to see if I’ll lose my temper, I thought. The principal. A few streaks of her long braided hair touched her cheeks. I focused on her dress. It was bright blue, sleeveless, with jewels around the neck line. I complimented the dress. Was I trying to bribe her?

She smiled. Her lips were shiny. “You’ll be just fine,” she assured me and stood up. She added that I wouldn’t be alone: there’d be another teacher in the room in all of my classes. “Wonderful co-teachers,” she said, raising her eyes to the ceiling. Before she wished me good luck, she explained: that’s where the kids need me most, in math and science.

I left her office, walked through a long wide hallway. The scent of fresh paint was nauseating. The walls were so white that it was almost blinding to look at them. I entered an empty classroom and collapsed in a chair. In a sudden flashback, my high school math teacher,

Ms. Rabka, in the gray wrinkled skirt she always wore, stands before me. She's holding a ruler. On the blackboard, I see equations that make no sense, numbers that form no pattern, ill-mannered numbers laughing at me. Ms. Rabka snaps the ruler on her desk and yells, "You failed again!" In tears, I trod over to a chemistry class. Ms. Nowak, her hair in disarray, announces a test on the periodic table of elements. I glance at the colorful poster in the room, letters H, Ag and S zigzag in front of me like the numbers in math. I open my secret diary and continue narrating my misery. "I hate math and science," I scribble as Ms. Nowak points to the periodic table with her index finger.

Ten years later, I was back at high school, this time as a teacher. My new boss, who just two months ago had hired me to teach English Language Arts, now announced that my new assignment was math and science. She'd made a mistake? Is that what she said? This wasn't a mistake; it was a stab in the back. I was like a love letter that, sent to a Scottish castle, ends up in a new condo development in Manhattan's Washington Heights. I was like the insect from Kafka's *Metamorphoses*. Math and science? I couldn't teach math and science. The kids would see right through me. The wonderful co-teachers would see right through me. All of New York City would make fun of me. At the end of the school year ceremony, Ms. Taylor would have to create a special prize: for the worst math and science teacher that ever walked on the city's uneven sidewalks. She'd call me onto the stage and ask, "What's 1×1 , Ms. Barnes?" The teachers and students in the audience would be silent, waiting for my answer. Ms. Taylor, with a microphone in her hand, would repeat the question. I'd shiver, look around, see blurry faces ready to witness my humiliation. "Two?" I'd finally blurt out. Ms. Taylor, suddenly holding a ruler, would snap it, and the roaring laughter from the audience would echo in my ears forever. I'd crawl into a dark corner of the stage feeling just like that insect.

The next day I walked into a 9th grade algebra class and introduced myself as a math teacher. I had no choice. My voice was shaking. Ms. Williams, my co-teacher, was saying that she loved algebra. Her cheerful voice sounded creepy. Next was chemistry. 11th grade. I'd be collaborating with Mr. Tompkins, an older man in a white shirt and blue tie. In the classroom, he pointed to the periodic table and said something that no literature major would ever understand.

Although I didn't win the worst math and science teacher ever prize, neither did I learn math. Nor science. But I did learn something. I learned that if you hate what you do, there is no shame in quitting, as I did after a year and a half. I learned about the workings of the inner-city public school system in New York. And, most importantly, I discovered a voice to write about it all. And write I did. I produced articles and short stories, some of which appeared in print. When an educator from California responded to one of my pieces and said that she'd had a similar experience in Los Angeles, I knew not only that my voice was heard, but also that I wasn't alone. Finally, after years of work, I finished a novel loosely based on the time I "taught" math and science in a public high school in Manhattan. While I may never be able to calculate percentages or find the right elements on the periodic table, I have no regrets. Every life experience makes me a wiser human being and a better writer. As Henry James, one of my beloved writers, once said, "Try to be one of those on whom nothing is lost