

## **School Fights**

*By Jen Ghastin*

Honestly, I wasn't listening when the fight began. I was taking attendance on the other side of the room. A cacophony of, "What bitch?"s and my hand rose for the phone. I didn't say anything, not to them, not to Carmen and Arielle, not to the class already ha-roo and ha-raaing, taking sides and circling. I didn't step in-between the girls with my arms outstretching, crucifying myself for the safety of the class. I didn't yell or blow my whistle. No, I just rose from the computer, dialed "O" and reported, "Fight in 812." The other end said okay, and by then Carmen had invited Arielle to take the fight outside. The class followed the girls to the doorway. I pushed my way through them and shoved the one strangler back into the room.

I gave a few weak, "You guyes" and "stops." But I didn't intervene. Arielle went for Carmen's throat, missed and Carmen lugged her slow and hard right in the back of the head. Later, security would say that the girl's didn't even know how to fight, but from my point of view the fight was straight vicious.

Once, a few years back there was a girl-on-girl fight in my classroom. Those girls were real little, so I stepped in-between them thinking that would stop the fight. It didn't. I was caught, and hit, and caught and hit some more. Nothing serious, but a seriously bruised right arm. They were little girls.

Carmen was huge, not fat, but several inches taller than me. She had an edge to her and you didn't want to ask. The kind of student who doesn't trust you, because everyone she's ever trusted has wronged her. When I asked her about her parents coming to back to school night last week, she smiled and said, "They don't care about me." I

wasn't surprised by her response, but I was saddened. I wanted to tell her, "Yes they do. But I don't know that. Then I wanted to tell her, I care about you Carmen, but it seemed so corny, so I changed subjects. Arielle didn't come to school for the first month. I should have called home the first day, because second month into school her parole officer introduced me to her and explained how she was intercepting the school's messages home and had spent the first month of school at her boyfriend's house. After our introduction, her attendance was still spotty. I didn't call home then either. I figured I was calling home for the ones I could save, the ones who cared, the ones who were here. I missed her. She slipped. There were one to many, ten too many, twenty too many and I let some slip. If I had called home that first day, would she have come? If I had kept calling home would she have come? If she had come that first day would she have done this?

You know, I'm not a god or a super hero; I am a high school English teacher, which on most days feels like less than human. Like today.

Lugs to the back of the head, the other teachers close their doors, Lugs to the back of the head, and I stop Alex from joining, holding her by the door, holding them all in the classroom, with my body, with my wobbling high heel shoes. Maybe if I had wore boots, not these shoes I could have, would have. Ten blows later, a large, large cop, the principal also in wobbling high heels, and the Vice Principal a white older man come running down the hallway. Carmen stops on her own. Arielle is lifted off the ground by the large, large cop. He twists her head to the right, I think he is going to snap her neck. Later, I learn this is a head-lock—you know so she won't bite. They are gone and my students ask me why I am shaking. They ask me why I didn't stop it. I ask myself. I

honestly know I couldn't even if I tried. I get a phone call later. The girls are expelled. Both. They said I did everything "text-book perfect." It doesn't feel that way.

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I open the back door to Ms. G's classroom and she jumps. Like I'm gonna attack her or something. "You swear I'm gonna jump you," I joke. She wants to know where I am supposed to be right now and I honestly have no clue. "I'm supposed to be in your class." I look around and no one is in the class, like a bad dream and I'm misplaced in reality. I know I just smoked a blunt, but that wouldn't make the whole class disappear. Actually, I decide this is better. "I'm having a serious problem right now, Ms. G. You've got to help me." She asks if I am hiding from administration. I guess I was hiding from them this morning, but no, I think they forgot. She looks at my ankle bracket and asks if I am hiding from the police. No, can't hid from them, I shake my leg and we both smile. "Then why aren't you in class, she repeats."

"I'm telling you. I am having a serious problem." She pulls away from her computer and gets into some sort of white listening position: head rests on hand, knees crossed. "I've got this new lady. And now, my old lady's been calling me saying that she wants to get back together. I like her, but I like my new lady too. What do I do?" First she raises her eyes and explains that of all my problems this one doesn't seem too serious, not serious enough to miss Algebra one over, but it must be serious to me, so I need to make a list, a pro and con list. "I'm not writing a fucking, my bad, essay. I am asking you about these women." She explains, I still need to make the list. I do and Ms.

G goes back to her computer. Annalise on one side. She's the new one. She's on house arrest like me, is that a pro or a con? "Ms. G, if one of them is on house arrest, is that a Pro or a Con?"

"Umm... A con. You don't want trouble makers."

"No, but check this. If she's on house arrest, I know she ain't going be cheating, see?" I feel clever. Ms. G rolls her eyes annoyed at me, I think. I write down who they both kick it with, weighing in my mind back and forth which group I like better. The social mess of dumping them, how that's gonna fuck with my other friends. Then I remember, Sabrina, that's the ex, saying she had to go to Planned Parenthood and that she had to come back because a test was inclusive or something and then I remember Annalese saying she wanted to... and I didn't, but and we did, but without and I ask,

"What about if they are gonna have my baby. Is that pro or con?"

Ghastin pulls away from her computer, cornering me and asks, "The one who is pregnant. That is the one you pick."

I smile guiltily, What if it's not one of them."

"Both of them are pregnant?"

"I don't know."

"Then you don't need to make a list. You need to walk down to Longs buy a stick and that's your test. What were you thinking? How did you get two girls pregnant?"

"They wanted too. They said they wanted to have my baby. So I was like coo." She's mad. Her forehead is all wrinkles.

The bell rang, interrupting our conversation. She just stared at me, like she hated me. Sometimes I hate me too. Especially when people look at me like that. Especially

when Ms. G looks at me like that. I buried my head in my hands. I didn't even budge when a fight broke out. I stayed in my desk, head buried in my hands until the bell rang again and I skipped History to go to Longs.

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They are so immature. They are all so immature. Class opens with a stupid fight. And they all get up to watch, like they haven't seen a fight before. And the teacher, she gets all nervous and shaking, maybe she hasn't seen a fight before. Probably hasn't. She doesn't even do anything. She just stands there until security comes and then is all shaking and goes on with her lesson. We read a story yesterday about gay people—it was a total flop. She was all trying to teach tolerance, and it back fired. The situation is actually worse now. And to add to that, she doesn't stop, she keeps pushing it, and pushing it. Doesn't she get that they are all immature and stupid and I think she thinks she can actually change people. Like she's the great white hope or the woman in that corny movie. I forget the name of it. Never mind that there's this huge gang fight, or whatever, let's talk about gays, and this is bugging me because I am the fucking only lesbian in the class, right? And I don't really feel like standing up and defending myself today. Trust me, I do it enough. Not, only that but it's coming out how the class is full of homophobes—it's better if we just drop this whole thing. Please I'd rather learn grammar or Greek mythology than this shit. The woman doesn't know what she is doing. She writes in big letters "Proposition 8- the banning of gay marriage." Now she wants us to write down if we are for or against gay marriage. I write this instead:

Dear Ms. G,

I get what you are trying to do and all, but the class is way to immature for this. I would appreciate it if we learned about something else. I feel very uncomfortable in class. Could we please not talk about this anymore.

Sincerely,

Cindy

She calls it teaching tolerance. She's trying to save the world and it's killing me.

"You're gay."

"That's gay."

"Fucking fag."

"Fucking faggot."

I sink and sink and sink into my chair, into the back of the room, out of the class.

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"Security. 1014 Room 812. Over."

"Copy," I say walking away from the ambulance, the last disaster. Carlos Rodriguez had an anxiety attack and stopped breathing, during lunch. He's fine now.

I love my job, I love my job, it's my mantra. Now in a light jog, my keys and change jingling. My dress shoes slapping and clapping the white concrete. I never know what to wear to work.

Two girls in a hallway. Two girls who can't fight. Officer Shepard picks up the little one, and puts her in a head lock. I charge the bigger one, but she stops and I have no reason to knock her down. Damn. Because with all this momentum I could really knock someone. Honestly, I was a little disappointed Shepard got all the action. He

pulled the little one down the hall and into his office. I took the bigger one, Carmen around the corner for a walk a cool down, and then we returned to my office to write the report.

There's zero tolerance for fights. That means these two are expelled. Later, I try to explain to Ms. G that the girls are broken. That nothing is her fault. That she did the right thing.

"The girls are going to learn more today from this fight than anything they could have learned in your classroom all year long. Try not to take things too personally."

The lunch bell rings and I am thinking tacos.