

Renee Williams

The alarm next to my bed blares “The Real Slim Shady” and I fall out of bed... again. That’s the third time this week. Just another reason to hate mornings. I begrudgingly pull myself to a sitting position and slip on some sweatpants and a sweatshirt.

“Jacob! Tyler! Are you getting dressed?” I yell through the wall to my brothers’ room next door as I rip at the thick, dirty blonde knots of hair consuming my head.

Looks like I’m wearing my hair up again. I end up having to brush my teeth and put on shoes at the same time. *If anyone saw me I would probably look insane.* I hop from one foot to the other, trying not to tumble to the ground, while toothpaste slowly oozes out of my mouth. I accidentally poke myself in the eye while I try to put in my contacts, making my mascara runny. My usually dark brown eyes now look like a wet, black mess. I have to quickly wipe all the trails of makeup off my face. After making the two of them breakfast, I help my little brothers get ready for school and walk them to the bus stop, which happens to be in the exact opposite direction of my school. Hurrying back home, I know I’m late and don’t have time to even consider breakfast.

“I love you mom!” I yell, getting my backpack ready and grabbing my coat as I fly out the front door, nearly tripping down the front steps.

The entire walk to school all I can think about is my mom. *Maybe if Dad hadn’t left us stranded, Mom wouldn’t have to work three jobs in order to support our family. All I do is watch Jacob and Tyler while she’s gone, and I’m falling apart at the seams. I don’t know how she does it.* I’m shaken from my thoughts by my watch alerting me that school just started. Running for my life, I finally get to school and am greeted by empty hallways and a severe lack of loudly slamming lockers. I’m late and everyone else is already in class, summoned by the insanely loud bell. I trudge to first block, Intro to Art with Mr. Holland. I am not looking forward to this at all. *Why does he have to be so mean? Maybe he’s just mad all the time because he’s losing his hair. I mean, you can’t hold onto that big, bushy mustache forever.*

Mr. Holland

First period; this should be fun. Not. Why do I have to be here this early in the morning? Mornings are the worst. I should have gotten a different job. Not only do I have to wake up early, but I have to deal with bratty teenagers all day too. I wish I wasn’t here. The bell rings obnoxiously loud and students reluctantly file into the room.

“Welcome back to Introduction to Art. How is everyone today,” I manage to groan out at them, trying my best to sound, as my contract mandates, ‘happy to teach the wonderful little teenagers of

today,' but failing tremendously.

Whatever. They don't care, I don't care, why should I even bother. I take attendance and hand them the worksheets that I had to stand at the printer for forty five minutes to print out earlier this morning. Most start writing sloppily but as I look out of the corner of my eye, I see her. *This little monster never does anything right.* She's late again and it takes all my strength to stop myself from suspending her right on the spot. I can't take it.

"Renee Williams. Late again I see. What's your excuse this time?" She replies with a snotty, little snarky remark consisting entirely of lies. I cut her off mid-sentence and she still has the guts to interject another excuse. *The nerve of this rotten, little waste of space.*

Renee Williams

"Mr. Holland I'm sorry but--"

He cuts me off before I even have a chance to utter more than a simple apology. *Excuse you. Why do you even ask a question if you don't want an answer? Jerk.* I try to get my emotions under control as I fight back the urge to simultaneously cry and punch him square in the face.

"Mr. Holland I'm really sorry I swear! My brothers wouldn't get out of bed this morning and," my voice falters near the end and my concrete reasoning behind my tardiness crumbles to dust under Mr. Holland's intimidating glare. I never finish my sentence.

I scream internally as thoughts I just can't seem to control flash through my brain like lightning. *Jacob and Tyler wouldn't cooperate today. We're out of cereal so I had to take the time to cook actual breakfast. My dad's an asshole. My mom is working three jobs and it's still not enough. I'm drowning in homework that I don't have time to do because I work two jobs. It's not fair. You wouldn't understand. Nobody ever understands.* I can't say any of this out loud because it would seem like I'm complaining and just being a typical teenager. Besides, teens always over-exaggerate and blame others for everything anyways so what's the use of actually listening to them? I prepare myself for Mr. Holland to unleash all hell and give me a week's worth of lunch detentions. He composes himself and I try to remember to breathe.

"Detention after school. Two hours today. Two hours tomorrow. Don't be late," was all he replied in a monotonous voice void of all emotion.

My heart stops. *I can't have detention after school. I have to pick up Jacob and Tyler at the bus stop. I can't be late. I can't disappoint them. I can't.*

"Mr. Holland I can't stay after school for detention. Can we reschedule for sometime not after

school please,” I’m almost begging now.

“Not a chance,” he barks, “I’m sure you’re lying anyways. Teenagers always lie. Maybe this will teach you to stop lying. Now sit down.”

I follow his order. I sit down. I sit down for the rest of the block staring numbly at the papers in front of me. The bell rings horribly loud and I make my way upstairs to Calculus room 204 with Miss Clark. I feel so hollow inside. *I can’t let my brothers down like this. They’re counting on me.* I sit heavily in my chair and stare at the stark white board behind Miss Clark.

“Good morning class,” twittered Miss Clark in her exceedingly cheery voice. Her platinum blonde extensions bounce around her face as she greets us. *She’s so fake. She tries too hard to get students to like her but it never works.* I struggle to pay attention, because I actually like math, but my brain is rendered useless by Mr. Holland’s harsh words. *I want to curl up into a ball and cry until I’m completely out of tears.* Class drags on and on, and I can barely muster up the will to care about this stupid Divergence Theorem we’re working on. I slip in and out of the lecture Miss Clark is giving; only hearing snippets of sentences. *I try to care, I really do. There’s just so much I can focus on at once and it’s hard to give my 100 percent to Calculus.* I draw on my binder for the final half hour of class as waves of sadness and anger mix into my overall feeling of anxiety that school gives me. The bell rings repulsively loud, releasing me from class and allowing me the slight reprieve of lunch. I stand up to leave but don’t make it to the door before Miss Clark’s excessively manicured hand pats my shoulder.

“Renee, please stay after class. I just want to talk to you, sweetie.”

Miss Clark

“Good morning class!”

I scan the crowd of faces before me. Only a few seem eager to be here. *I wish that teenagers would care about their futures. Honors Calculus is very important for getting into college. College means having a career. They just don’t care as much as they used to.* I teach today’s lesson on Divergence Theorem and all the students start taking notes except the quiet girl in the back of the room. *Why don’t I know her name? She never participates that’s why. She obviously doesn’t care about her future. Maybe she’ll care when she has to work at McDonalds for the rest of her life.* I make a mental note to talk to her after class. I turn my attention back to the Theorem I’m teaching. Time flies and before I even know it, the unattractively loud bell rings. I hand out two homework sheets and students start to file out of the room. I check the girl’s name on my attendance sheet and go to catch her arm.

I try to be as pleasant as possible as I begin, “Renee, please stay after class. I just want to talk to

you, sweetie.”

She grimaces and I know this is not going to be as easy as I had pictured earlier. I ponder for a moment before confessing that I’m worried about her future. She doesn’t seem to register what I said. *Enough is enough. This girl is going to throw her life away because she doesn’t care.*

Before I could stop myself, I blurt out, “Why do you teenagers never care?” I try to stop but now I’m on a roll. “Do you want to throw your life away? Teenagers never realize what they’re doing until it’s too late. Try and put some effort in and start caring now or else you’re going to waste your life honey.”

Renee just stares at me blankly before shrieking, “I do care! I care too much! Teachers don’t understand that some students have more than just school to worry about! Like me; I have so much on my plate. I have a family to help support. You wouldn’t understand because you don’t care about us ‘teenagers’.”

I’m struck dumbfounded. All I can do is reach into my desk and hand her three more worksheets.

“These are due tomorrow with the rest of your homework. Maybe giving you more homework will teach you to care a little bit and stop you from being so rude. Now get out of my room, darling.”

Renee Williams

This is not going to end well. I just stand there and absorb all the criticism about me that Miss Clark has to offer. I plan to just take everything she has to throw at me and leave, but she screeches about how I don’t care and teenagers never care about school and how I’m ‘throwing my life away’. I can’t bear it.

I can’t stop myself from crying out in anguish, “I do care! I care too much! Teachers don’t understand that some students have more than just school to worry about! Like me; I have so much on my plate. I have a family to help support. You wouldn’t understand because you don’t care about us ‘teenagers’.”

I regret it immediately and wish I could just disappear. *Why did I say that? It’s true though. I’ve got more than just school to worry about. I have a family that needs me.* I watch in confusion as Miss Clark reaches into her desk. *What on earth could she be getting out of her desk at a time like this? Is she going to give me detention? She and Mr. Holland will have to compete for detention time with me.* She hands me three worksheets and tells me to have them completed with the other two already assigned for tomorrow. *This is ridiculous and if she actually believes that giving me more homework will make me care more about school she’s nuts. There’s no way I’ll have five worksheets done by tomorrow.* I leave

her room wordlessly and caution a look back. She's silently fuming at her desk. *Serves her right.*

Finally getting downstairs to the cafeteria, I get my lunch and sit with some of the kids that I actually like to talk to. Lunch passes quickly and I've barely touched my unappealing chicken nuggets and soggy green beans. As the bell rings deafeningly loud, I try to move through the masses of people crowding the halls. *I've got to get to English before the bell rings again so I can ask to go to the bathroom before class starts.* I make it to the English hall to see my teacher, Mr. Robertson, standing outside his classroom chatting with another teacher, Mr. Palmer. I stand next to him and wait for the two to finish their conversation. The bell's about to ring and I need to ask him soon or else he won't let me go.

I pause for a moment and then ask, "May I go to the bathroom before class starts?"

He turns to me and pushes his glasses back up his nose a bit before muttering a simple, "No," and turns back to his friend.

I don't want to be rude, but the bell is about to ring and it's urgent. I reach out and lightly tap his shoulder to regain his attention. He turns around and seems annoyed but if I ask to go to the bathroom during class he'll be even more aggravated.

"Mr. Robertson please it's an emergency. The bell's about to ring and I know you don't like it when students ask to go to the bathroom during class. I was just thinking of you," I plead.

He looks at me through astonished and furious eyes. Then, unexpectedly, the corners of his lips upturn into a huge grin. He turns to Mr. Palmer and cackles, "Just thinking of me. Of course little Miss Renee was just thinking of me. As if a teenager like her could think of anyone besides herself. Teens are all just like one another; selfish."

Mr. Robertson and Mr. Palmer share a laugh before they both turn to stare at me. They expect me to fight back, to earn myself more punishment, probably in the forms of detention and extra homework, but I don't want to. They treat my life like a joke. *I'm tired of fighting for myself. Why do teachers put down teenagers all the time? Not all teens are liars, careless and selfish.* I walk into the classroom with my head down and sit at my desk. I don't say a single word the rest of the block because I can tell Mr. Robertson is just waiting to call me out for anything I say.

Mr. Robertson

I'm sharing a magnificent and thought-provoking conversation with my friend Jack Palmer when out of nowhere one of my students, Renee Williams, walks up to me and interrupts us.

She asks if she can go to the bathroom before class starts and, hoping to get rid of her, I answer

with a straightforward, “No.” I fix my glasses back over my eyes in the process.

I turn back to Jack to imply that I want her to leave, but she doesn’t. Instead, she rudely beats on my shoulder and asks to go to the bathroom again, stating that it’s an emergency. I can’t help but snicker. This girl is so ridiculous.

Deciding to speak to Jack, I laughed, “Just thinking of me. Of course little Miss Renee was just thinking of me. As if a teenager like her could think of anyone besides herself. Teens are all just like one another; selfish.”

We share a laugh before I turn and look at the juvenile girl. She bows her head, defeated, and walks into the classroom.

“Maybe that’ll teach her not to be so selfish,” I offer to Jack. He nods his head slightly.

The bell rings unpleasantly loud and I say a quick goodbye to my friend. Miss Williams doesn’t look up from her desk. *It’s a shame that girl is so self centered. She could have been successful.* Class moves rather quickly as I set the students up to have a discussion about Huckleberry Finn. That should keep them busy for another three classes. I sit at my desk and correct tests for the remaining hour. The girl never says a word.

Renee Williams

I leave English class as quickly as possible and go to the bathroom. It takes everything I have to not break down and bawl while I’m in there. I get out into the crowded hallway, filled with groups of people who decide to block the whole hall so no one can get around them and then refuse to move when people ask them to. It takes like what seems forever to get to my locker and get my jacket and books. Rushing as much as I can in the mob, I make my way to the science hall. I’m greeted by Mrs. Obrien the Chemistry teacher. I sit in the back of the room and take out my notebook and a pen. She hands out a worksheet to work on in groups. I work by myself. Usually I work with the people sitting next to me, but today I can’t gather the energy or patience to work with others well. Everything seems to be going fine until, out of the corner of my eye, I see a flash of red curly hair and a dark shade of lipstick coming towards me. It’s Mrs. Obrien and she asks me to come out into the hallway with her. *What could she possibly want to say to me?*

Mrs. Obrien

I look around the room to make sure all the students are working well in their groups. I notice Renee Williams sitting in the back by herself. *That’s strange; usually she works with the people around her quite well. I wonder if something’s wrong. I’ll go talk to her.* I try to be as discrete as possible and

call her into the hall. I don't want to embarrass her by talking about whatever's bothering her in front of everyone. When we get into the hall, Renee won't even make eye contact with me. Something must really be upsetting her.

I clear my throat and begin, "I'm worried about you."

No sooner do I finish my sentence does she erupt, "What could you possibly be worried about? Are you worried that I'm going to become a lying, lazy, selfish, good for nothing stuck working at a fast food restaurant the rest of my life because if you are then get in line because you aren't the first. All teachers are the same. You all think that every single teenager on the face of this earth is a careless waste of space and I'm tired of fighting for myself against adults like you."

She's crying slightly now. She makes no move to wipe away the tears or even acknowledge that they're slowing trailing down her face. I'm shocked to say the least but I want to investigate why she feels the way she does.

I venture to guess, "I'm assuming that some other teachers have been putting you down lately. You say that teachers group all teens together in the respect that they're lying, careless, and selfish, but did you ever stop and think that you're doing just the same? By saying that all teachers judge all teens, you're judging all the teachers."

She looks taken aback by my response. She shakily whispers, "You aren't going to yell at me, or give me detentions or extra homework?"

I respond, "Why would I do that to you? You're just stressed out right now. You've probably got a lot on your plate. Everyone has been through hard times, heck even me. Punishing you would just make it worse."

Renee Williams

Mrs. Obrien's words hit my like a freight train.

"I understand now. Teachers have it rough too. I never stopped to think that maybe I'm not the only one having a hard time coping with everyday life. Teachers have families to worry about too. I have Jacob and Tyler just like teachers have kids of their own to take care of. Other teens probably have something difficult going on in their lives too. I never stopped to think, to understand others."

I look at Mrs. Obrien standing in front of me and I realize that I've just said all of my thoughts out loud. She smiles at me and holds the classroom door open. We reenter the room and I take my seat. As class goes by it becomes easier and easier to work with the people around me and before I know it, we've finished the class work and Mrs. Obrien announces that there is no homework tonight. The bell

rings brilliantly loud as I pack my bag and merge into the hallway traffic. I arrive to the art and music hall for detention with Mr. Holland, on time, and enter his room quietly. He looks at me with silent anger that I'm not late and he can't give me more detentions. I don't care.

"Mr. Holland, I'm sorry I'm late all the time, but it's not always my fault. Is it my fault sometimes? Yes. I'm not saying that I'm one hundred percent blameless, but it's not completely my lack of responsibility, like you think it is. I'm late all the time because I have to help my little brothers get ready for school in the morning and walk them to the bus stop. They're almost completely dependent on me, in the morning and the afternoon when I get them off the bus and walk them home. That's why I can't serve detentions afterschool. I have to watch them all day in between working two jobs to help support my family because my dad left us four years ago and my mom needs help," I confess to him.

I never thought I would be telling any teacher, let alone Mr. Holland, so much of my life. He stares at me through blank eyes and rubs thoughtfully at the small bush growing under his nose.

He states a plain, "I don't care."

He waits for me to become infuriated, but I don't. It doesn't bother me that he's so rude to me anymore. I have a newfound respect for him because he probably has other issues to deal with that make him like this. His anger doesn't hurt me anymore. I take a seat at a desk without being told to. I finish the three extra homework assignments Miss Clark gave me during the two hour time period. I don't even get angry at her for assigning it. Her punishments don't bother me anymore. Not even Mr. Robertson's harsh remarks can upset me now. I don't care if he treats my life like a joke. It only matters that I don't treat my own life like a joke anymore. I feel free.