**MY FIRST LOCKDOWN DRILL**

By Elise May

"Go!" the teacher says loudly during my lesson after hearing a chime seemingly in code over the speaker. In this classroom, the teacher chooses to use single word directives such as “slant” to get the children to sit up straight and attend. It seems to work well with this group. Everyone starts moving around the room getting under desks and behind chairs. I am jostled as I do my best to stay out of the way. I find a place where I could sit down in a chair that is out of sight lines of the classroom door. The teacher says, “Come with me,” and asks me to stand in his closet thinking I will be more comfortable in there than on my knees on the floor. I guess sitting in a chair is not an option. The space inside the closet is incredibly small. I barely have room to keep my feet shoulders width apart with boxes stacked up on all sides.   As he's closing the door the teacher kindly asks if I'm claustrophobic. I am but I don't say so. I don't know if this is a drill and don't want the teacher to take time worrying about me. I try to keep the door cracked open as it's pitch dark inside the closet and I don't want to have a panic attack. I can see the classroom door on the other side of the room through the crack which is now my lifeline to air and light. I still have no idea if this is a drill or not. The teacher gets down on the floor leaning on the closet door and I have to push from the inside to keep my crack of light and air coming in. I don't know how long I will be in here. I think about the lesson I was teaching. I only had five minutes left and then had to go to another class. I find myself getting aggravated about the loss of instructional time. The students have a performance on Friday and I need every minute I have with them. Through the crack I see a person is out in the hall. The door handle jiggles. Then nothing. Then it hits me - I really don't know if this is a drill. Someone moves. The teacher shushes. For the most part all is silent. The tension in the room is palpable. It is in the closet as well. Then, someone farts. A natural body phenomenon that under any other circumstances would have had a class of 9-year-olds rolling on the floor laughing was met with one nervous titter and another shush. A man dressed in black enters the room, looks around and then says all is clear and don’t move around the room until instructed to do so. He must have been a security guard, but I don’t recognize him. It is only my third session at this school this year. The room relaxes with audible sighs but still no one moves. After what seemed like an eternity, the principal's voice came through the overhead speaker saying that this was indeed a drill, and all was clear. “Good job, everyone!”

The classroom teacher says it's okay to move and everyone makes their way back to their seats. I am now overdue for my next class, but I can't imagine packing up and leaving without a quick closing exercise to refocus and get the students to reflect on something other than the lockdown. Walking into the next class five minutes late I am met with a classroom full of 9-year-old students who can't seem to focus. I start my lesson with a fun opening activity thinking it won't take long to refocus the group, but the students are extremely distracted. This supportive classroom teacher emphasizes how little time the students have with me before their performance. The lesson proceeds with an uphill battle of quelling secondary conversations to get everyone back on track. The disciplinary support techniques of this teacher, added to my own, are loving but strict.  I share with her that I totally understand their inability to shake off the lockdown experience and would have loved to have initiated a different lesson were it not for our performance deadline.

All I can think about is sitting against the cold tile of my elementary school hallway with my knees up to my chest and my hands over my head, nervous about the bomb that was sure to drop on my school, grateful that it didn’t on that day and wondering if going to school was worth the risk.

As Teaching Artists part of our charge is to create a safe space for creative exploration where all voices can be heard. I left that school that day knowing our jobs are more important than ever.



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