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O Captain, My Captain

I'll always remember tearing open that yellow envelope and reading that name. The process of breaking that seal encapsulated the moment of nerve-wracking excitement that came at the end of every summer as a kid. There was nothing that made my heart pound and my hands sweat more than finding out what teacher I'd get for the next school year. Eighth grade hadn't even started yet, but I already had visions of a fun teacher and the perfect end to grade school. I pulled out the bundle of papers and fumbled through them to find the only thing I cared about: the homeroom assignment. I found the paper, and felt a sense of dread and sorrow after reading it. I got stuck with Mrs. Dixon, the strictest teacher in the entire school. Little did I know then, Mrs. Dixon would turn out to be the greatest teacher I've ever had, and even though I have long since graduated, I'll always consider myself one of her students.

I didn't know it when I first read her name on my envelope, but Mrs. Dixon had the best sense of humor of any adult I've ever encountered. For instance, one time during recess, my friends Whitney and Makayla and I created a life size cardboard cutout of a person, made clothes for it, and printed a picture of Mrs. Dixon's face on the head. We convinced the whole class to pretend that the cardboard cutout was our actual teacher for the rest of the day. When Mrs. Dixon walked into homeroom and saw herself sitting in her chair, she about had a heart attack because she was laughing so hard. She thought it was so funny that she let the fake Mrs. Dixon stay by her desk for the rest of the year and even started using it as a puppet to teach some lessons. When

we first made it, I was expecting her to reprimand us for messing around. Nevertheless, her hilarious personality let her see the humor in this situation and many others like it.

Not only did Mrs. Dixon have the ability to laugh, but she also had the ability to relate whatever we were learning about to a bunch of eighth graders in a way that we could apply to our lives. In one instance at the beginning of the year, she told us we were going to read the book *The Little Prince* by Antoine Saint-Exupery. All I knew was that it was originally written in French and, therefore, probably boring. However, I became completely enthralled with the story once she started reading it to the class and explaining parts of it to us. I'll never forget her favorite quote: "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly, what is essential is invisible to the eye." Using this quote, she explained that love has to come from something more important than just physical appearance or attraction. She even went so far as to share personal stories of how she met her husband, and how once she fell in love with him, she felt like she could see into his soul. For an eighth grade girl, the idea of a love this genuine completely captivated me. I never expected my philosophy on love to come from some French book, but because of how well Mrs. Dixon related it to me, I always keep her lessons in the back of my mind.

Mrs. Dixon related the importance of education to me by being the teacher that challenged me the most. For instance, towards the end of second semester, our final project for literature class was to compose a book filled with various types of poetry. I'll admit that I slacked off a little toward the end of the year. I might not have put as much time into the project as I should've, but the final product wasn't bad at all. A couple weeks after they had been turned in, Mrs. Dixon asked me to pass the books back out with the grades attached. As I handed them back to my classmates, I looked at the grades and was ready for another easy A. Almost everyone received an A, even the really awful books that obviously hadn't received a lot of

effort. I remember getting to mine and seeing the grade “B+” on the back, which for me, was like an F. I had seen books way worse than mine that had gotten A’s. I was so mad that I confronted Mrs. Dixon about it after school. I’ll always remember what she said when I asked her about my grade. She told me that if I could look her in the eyes and honestly tell her that this was the best I could do, she would gladly change my grade to an A. It would have been easy to just lie and take the higher grade; certainly, I’d be lying if I said I didn’t think about it. But she knew that I could do better, and she knew that I knew I could do better. I still have that poetry book with the “B+” as a reminder to never take the easy way out. I am thankful I had a teacher like Mrs. Dixon to challenge me to be better every day.

Mrs. Dixon also challenged me to be trustworthy. She was the greatest teacher not because I trusted her, but because she trusted me. For example, one spring day, Mrs. Dixon asked me if I would stay after school so she could talk to me about something. My immediate reaction was to instinctively scour my mind trying to think of anything I had done wrong recently. I figured I must be getting in trouble and braced myself for a hearty reprimand. After the bell rang and all the other students left, I went up to her desk and sat down on the orange chair she made kids sit in when she talked to them. She sipped her coffee from her signature mug and pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose. Then, she took out a key on a gold chain and slid it across the table to me. I took it and examined it, confused. She explained that it was a copy of her house key and asked me if I would be willing to house sit for her while she vacationed that summer. My first reaction was pure, unadulterated relief that I wasn’t getting in trouble. I was then washed over with a sense of pride and honor that she trusted me enough to let me into her home. For a few weeks that July, I would come over every day and follow all of the instructions she left for me with the utmost diligence. I may have only been taking care of her pets, getting

the mail, and watering her plants, but to me it felt like the most important job in the world. Ever since then, I always try to act responsibly because Mrs. Dixon made me want to be the type of person worthy of her trust.

Mrs. Dixon didn't just give out her trust; she gave everything she could to her students because she was an absolutely selfless teacher and human being. In one example from the summer after I'd graduated, I wanted to go get a new book from the Eisley Library. This was the library closest to my house, but it was still a pretty far walk for a freshman without a car. Instead of going to the library, I walked to Mrs. Dixon's house, which was in my neighborhood. I told her I wanted a good book to read, but didn't have any ideas of what I should be looking for. Without hesitation, she pulled out a twelve-page list of her favorite books from a drawer in her living room coffee table. I'm not sure what she was doing before I had arrived, but she spent hours talking about the books with me, almost as if this was what she had been planning on doing all day. One of the books on the list that caught my attention was called *The General in His Labyrinth* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Mrs. Dixon told me it was an account of the life of a Columbian liberator named Simon Bolivar. What really intrigued me was when she said that the plot of the novel was Bolivar's quest to escape the labyrinth of suffering. She happened to have a copy of the book in her classroom, so she drove me there and let me into the locked-up school so I could get the book. The book ended up meaning so much to me that I referenced it in one of my admission essays for Notre Dame. It would have been easy for Mrs. Dixon to simply tell me a book, or not let me into her house at all. However, in this case, as in so many others, her selflessness allowed her to give her time and resources to anyone who asked.

It's funny to think about how depressed I was when I found out I had Mrs. Dixon for eighth grade homeroom. I wish I could go back in time and tell myself about all the incredible

things I would experience that year in her class. I smile every time I think about how she always laughed at my shenanigans. I find myself continually relating her lessons to things in every day life. She serves as a constant reminder that I have to work to overcome challenges that I face. Now, I always try to make decisions and live my life in a way that would be worthy of her trust. I want to be someone who always gives more than they take, just like Mrs. Dixon. I can't wait to see her over Christmas break so I can tell her about college and get more of her never-ending advice. Mrs. Dixon was the greatest teacher I ever had, and her lessons extended far beyond the scope of one year or one classroom. I'll always remember how lucky I was to tear open that yellow envelope and read that name.