

A few weeks ago I had a bad day. It was my first day teaching a classroom of 30 spoiled and rowdy sixth-graders and I was terrified: see, I am a substitute teacher. Not only had I heard the other teachers' horror stories but I was given, oh, thirty minutes notice to both gird myself and come up with some kind of lesson plan for the six classes I'd be teaching. Shit.

As the teacher I'd be replacing was giving me quick tips about classroom management she hesitatingly added one sentence that would seal the verdict for my entire day: "Eli is in there – he sits in the front." Every teacher knew him, and knew that the school had been trying for years to kick him out, convince his parents to move him elsewhere, to neutralize him in some, any, way.

I was expecting an ugly child, someone whose appearance reflected his unrepentant and shocking behavior; but he is already and will be very handsome and, for an instant, I thought maybe he was misunderstood, maybe the other (veteran) teachers didn't have the *touch*. Maybe he'd be my star student.

That Monday, he didn't disappoint. Erasing the board. Chewing up erasers and spitting them at students. Walking clear across the room to pocket someone else's pencil, mid-sentence. Threatening to punch a girl in the nose until "blood ran down her face." By the end of the first class with them, I'd decided not to return after winter break – what amount of money could be worth attempting to discipline a child like him?

The rest of the day didn't go much better, and I yelled more in those eight hours than the last eight months. I went to bed wondering just what in the hell had possessed me to become a teacher.

The next morning, though, something felt different. Perhaps it was the skeletal relief that comes with knowing, at the very least, what *kind* of horror awaits you. So I began to get ready and, out of the corner of my eye, I spied my jewelry box. Inside was the pair of earrings my mother used to wear daily, that she gave to me, and a slew of other earrings and bracelets I gravitated towards while travelling. I put on my mom's earrings and slid on a cloth bracelet that my best friend gave me, and which has a twin that she also wears.

The second day wasn't great, but it wasn't as God-awful as the day before. Part of it was the prior day's inoculation and part of it, honestly, was the earrings and the bracelet. I'm not superstitious but I can't help but feel that, on that day, they were my talismans. They were material things, yes, but they had been given to me by two people I love very dearly, and something about knowing that my mother – a pillar of strength – wore these same studs, carried them on her body, made me believe that they carried her energy and that maybe they could infuse me with that same resilience.

At any particularly difficult moment of the day I might feel helpless, or lost, or that I am not cut out for any role of authority; I might forget that I had a life before this job, that I laughed often, told lewd jokes, and danced with my friends. It might sound like an exaggeration but, when faced with a classroom of brazen and unapologetic primary school students – whom it is your job to control – your world easily shrinks to just that moment. And you feel like a failure. But looking down at my wrist, or feeling the metal in my earlobes, I felt a core power in drawing strength from the two pieces of jewelry: these were given to me out of love, because I am a whole and healthy person who is loved, and because I am worth so much more than that moment

reflects. If nothing else, this reminder that I have people who believe that I am strong and resourceful and resilient...makes me feel stronger, more resourceful, resilient. And that feeling of complete helplessness before the young masses? Well, that feeling wanes – if only for a few, precious, moments.