

one of their favorites. It allowed them to go places with their imaginations and create new words belonging to aliens on distant planets and secret groups living here on earth. I allowed them to take liberties, as long as it was for the good of the story. By January, I slowly began to see movement among those that most concerned me.

Somehow, we got through the year. We created a seventh-grade monthly newsletter, formatted like a regular newspaper. The kids loved it. We held staff meetings during lunch in the classroom, where we discussed different ideas for stories. It got them talking, it got them reading but, most importantly, it got them writing. By early May, I knew that I did not want to come back the following year. It wasn't the students, it was me. I didn't want ninety-six students. It really, for the most part, was as simple as that. Once I learned the rules (my rules), I liked the whole process of turning young people into writers or better writers than they were. I wanted my own classroom, with my own thirty kids. Lazy. Not a bit. Just realistic. I knew my limits, and my comfort zone. I left the school in June with the understanding that I would get to pick a new school as soon as the available classroom list was compiled for the coming school year. At almost fifty, I figured I had maybe fifteen or twenty years (with luck) years left to teach. Enough time to get it right.



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Sharing to Let Go

Nan Kuhlman

Teacher, I must tell you something."

His urgent voice took me by surprise as our developmental college reading and writing class had been dismissed five minutes before and everyone was gone except me, cleaning the whiteboard of my copious notes.

I put down the cloth and cleaner and said, "What's up, Ali?" Ali was one of my students in this class of international students. Most were from Saudi Arabia or Kuwait and Muslim by birth. We had forged an interesting relationship in our class, which was originally designed to help American students improve their reading comprehension of college-level materials but had morphed into a TESL class. Much of our class time was spent reading aloud; they read aloud, and I helped with the pronunciation or the definitions of the words. At times my usual ability to find a familiar synonym waned like an overused muscle, so I would tell stories to illustrate the meaning of words. I talked about experiencing my first earthquake (petrified) and the time my naked husband unknowingly walked in on our best friend's teenage daughter who was using our master bath (mortified).

They also shared their stories, mostly in response to my questions about their families and their culture. When I asked Hussain about his family, I discovered his mother was bedridden since he was a boy, a victim of depression and a lack of mental health care. Sami's family had to relocate during the Iraq War; their home was bombed. Nearly everyone told me how they were in the US to go to engineering school so they could return to the Middle East and work in their country. All of them spoke of wanting to make their parents, their families, proud of them.

Ali's face, already showing a five o'clock shadow at noon, was agitated, and I knew something was wrong. "I had something happen to me, and I want to tell you about it," he began as he paced the front row. "I was going to this gas station not far from the house where I live with my host family. I go there all the time; the cashiers know me. They like me; they say, 'Hi, Ali, how's it going?' Well, yesterday I was going in the gas station, and a black man I've never seen before cuts in front of me at the door. I let him go first, but he blocks my way, so I try

to go around, but he won't let me pass. He whispers something, but I can't understand him. He finally goes in, but he follows me around the store, saying things I can't hear. His face looked like this," Ali paused and summoned his most angry face.

"He leaves, but the cashier says to me, 'Ali, don't go out there. He's waiting outside for you, and I don't know if he has a knife or a gun. Just stay here a little while.'" Ali straightened his shoulders and said, "Teacher, I'm not afraid to fight, but I have no weapon. So I stay there until the cashier says he has gone." He stopped for a moment, clenched his fists, and the words spilled out of him: "Teacher, that man, he makes me afraid, so I hate him."

I paused for a moment to take in the irony of racial profiling, a Muslim victimized by an African American, a minority that knows too well the pain of being singled out due to one's ethnicity. "Did you or the cashier call the police, or did you tell your host family about this?" I asked.

Ali told me he didn't want to create any problems, that his host father was an attorney who would not hesitate to use the law to go after the gas station offender. "He will make a big problem, and it's not good to draw attention," Ali said, sensitive to the anti-Middle East sentiment in the US.

"What can I do to help?" I questioned, not knowing what I could do in this situation.

"You don't have to do anything," Ali said, grabbing his book bag and heading toward the door. "I just needed to tell someone, Teacher. Have a good day." He was off to join his friends for lunch, and I was left holding his story in my hands.

I studied the remaining notes on the whiteboard, my attempts to help these students with their Standard Written English. With cloth and cleaner in one hand, I scrubbed at the stubborn spots, the parts where the dry marker's etching had soaked in too deeply to rub off easily. The faded but visible marks offered a silent witness to our conversation and their presence a reminder of deeply-rooted attitudes which cannot be loosed easily.



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Soaring Past the Rainbow's Apex

Lisa Whalen

We soar. We suspend like astronauts. Time stretches. Then Penny's legs kick out, and we surge past our rainbow's apex, leaving a fence in our wake.

We're on solid ground too soon. I nudge Penny's flank with my right calf to coax her into forming another rainbow—a horizontal one that bends through an arena corner.

"Good!" my instructor, Liz, shouts. I flick my eyes at her and catch a blurred impression: stocking cap, black boots coated with sand, red light winking from a mic-pack at her waist.

Penny, the horse I'm on, belongs to Liz. So does the arena at Seventh Farm, a riding school in Wisconsin where I'm in my third year of lessons begun in my thirties.

Penny's hooves kick up sand as she digs in to accelerate out of the corner, ready to launch again. *This is it*, I think. *This is riding*. I don't want it to end.

"Walk," Liz commands. "Let's finish the lesson with that jump."

Reluctantly, I cue Penny to slow. She has carried me over countless fences, but this morning's jumps stand out in textured relief. Even before Liz had drawn breath to comment, I'd known that our efforts were good. Really good.

I pat Penny's neck. Steam swirls across her hide and warms fingers reddened by November's chill. Winter fuzz has dulled her mocha coat, whose fine summer hair had looked sprinkled with red-gold glitter in the sunlight. She exhales through puckered lips, then sighs with enough drama to shift me in the saddle. I smile. She's pleased with herself; she knows our jumps were good, too.

Our mutual appreciation is new. In fact, I'd resisted rolling out of bed that morning, anticipating an encore of past battles. Penny likes to test riders. Her favorite pranks include sliding to a stop ahead of fences and juking like a running back at the last second to go around instead of over. And her hijinks on flat ground dwarf those that involve fences. But when I maintain consistent contact through my legs, seat, and hands, as I did that Sunday morning, she rises to my expectations, and we become unstoppable.

That morning's reluctance to ride but subsequent success generated *déjà vu* the following afternoon, as I prepared lesson plans for classes