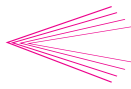


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Turn the Lights Off

Taffeta Wood



I've just moved into an apartment in Brooklyn. Even though it is small, it has a very long hallway. My neighbor's hallway is also very long. How do I know this? The answer is simple: Thumpalina.

Thumpalina is what I call the small three-year-old that lives next door. At any given hour of the day, I can hear Thumpalina running up and down her hallway with booming abandon.

Thump Thump Thump Thump Thump. I'm literally transcribing it for you right now. Thump, Thump, Thump, BANG, I'm kind of worried that she just hit a wall. WAAAAAA! Yep. She hit a wall.

I know I should have bigger things to think about. But, I just moved to New York. My days are spent looking for work in any field that does not involve teaching, but more on that later. The rest of my day is spent observing the tiny robot that turns the lights on and off. ^{inanimate}

The robot is a small round object that when moved

slightly, turns off the lights for a moment. Then the light turns on again.

Let me repeat myself, when moved slightly as in when the neighbor's three year old is on one of her regular thumpathons. So, between the spare time and her ability to cause black outs while I'm reading want ads, her running up and down schedule seems to sort of be at the center of what life is right now.

It's too bad she doesn't know that she's turning the lights on and off. Kids love messing with the lights.

That is why when I was working as a teacher in Los Angeles, I refused to use the preferred behavioral strategy of the administration: turn the lights off.

"Turn the lights off?" I asked my administrator, who when I inquired how to deal with kids screaming in my classroom said, "turn the lights off."

You know what kids do when you turn the lights off? They scream.

I was sure when I came to her the next day, after someone "tagged" my wall with the words "fat but", yes, spelled that way, b-u-t, she would have some sage words for me. How could I address the low literacy skills and the behavior? I asked.

"Honey, turn the lights off." she says. What in the gosh darn heck was she thinking? When you turn off the lights in a middle school classroom, even for a few seconds, it's like a tiny game of clue: what weapon, who did it, and in which room.

sneaky, a terror,
annoying

playful

You turn on the lights to find a maxi pad stuck to the chalkboard of your classroom. So, you know the weapon. Maxi-pad. But who did it? And in which room can you send them to think, oh think about what they have done.

My principal, stopping by on a day when a maxi pad was affixed to the board after a three second lights out, looked me straight in the eye and said, "I told you to turn the lights out. Sheesh."

Thump Thump Thump. There goes my toddling neighbor again. She was squalling a second ago. Now she is squealing with delight about well, moving from one place to another. That's so great.

Still, it's dark in here because every time she moves, it moves the robot that makes it dark. It really interferes with my job searching over the want ads.

I cap my red pen while the lights are out.

You have to use a red pen when you're looking for a job in New York. I saw it in a movie. You have to make big circles and look determined. You have to put your chin on your fist and look wistfully out the window at the skyline. And then, you're supposed to blur out and think about home and why brought you to the big old apple in the first place.

I cross my eyes to make the world seem blurry and do just that.

It started the day Guadalupe showed up to school wearing two rosaries. Guadalupe is the one who asks

light hearted ← light/dark → serious / mysterious

me if I believe in God with such earnestness that in my dream that night, she is made of dove soap.

So, while she always wears one cross, I have to hear why she needs two. What she tells me under her breath is between her and I. But I will say that I spent that afternoon talking to police officers and the night staring at the ceiling crying and discovering my own here-to-fore undiscovered desire to really, really kill a man.

I know this story maybe doesn't belong here. You go along reading this, things are ridiculous a la maxi pad on the chalkboard, you realize it's nuts but you're laughing, you're hanging in there and then all of the sudden bang, things get serious. But that's how it was.

Still, in the midst of the lives of my students becoming revealed to me for what they were, far more than anyone could be expected to handle at any age, they didn't have the language that Guadalupe had. Most teenagers don't have the grace to speak in hushed tones and put on two rosaries.

Most teenagers, like Michel will shove somebody's training bra up into the ceiling. Don't ask me how. I had turned the stupid lights out. He did it though. And I think he did it because he was in the 8th grade and couldn't even spell the words in the letter that he wrote to me explaining well, again I can't tell you. Let's just say that behind each strange choice or outlandish hijink, there seemed to be one more thing I can't tell you.

Things get worse but you stay. There's a gun hole through the window at the level of your head but it was there when you arrived. They weren't out for you. No biggie. But the thing is, you see more and more. And eventually, you're in the ER crying about your sleepless nights and the only explanation you can come up with is this:

I'm a teacher. So they recommend, okay, they pretty much demand that you not do that anymore.

So, I wound up in New York after I couldn't control a classroom. Or maybe, yeah, I wound up here because I couldn't control the feelings it brought up in me to stand in front of a room of teenagers and wonder what pockets of violence and neglect they may be living in. I picture that room, and them in it, a lot still. Who knows? Maybe the lights are out and the kids are sitting in rows silently, but I doubt it.

Chances are they're making a lot of noise because they want to be heard. And if the lights go out they'll get louder, so that they can be seen.

And three thousand miles away, the little girl next door is flipping my lights on and off. In the intermittent dark I sit.

And I think of them.

seen in dark