

The Braid

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I had loved my job as a special education public school teacher with a long, fulfilling career that lasted for more than three decades. I felt I had had a life well-lived, but I was ready to retire those almost six years ago...

It is April 2015. Yesterday, I had twelve inches cut off my hair. I plan on donating it, but, before I mail off my braid, I am bringing it to school today.

This is a chaotic world and the urban high school in which I am a teacher is loud and dramatic, tense and tiring. But for me, two months until retirement, I am giving my students one last gift. Through lockdowns and shelters-in-place, through fights in the cafeteria and gym, they arrive at my classroom where it is peaceful. The minute each one walks through the doorway, we live in the moment. That is my gift to them.

Sitting with a dozen desks in a circle, we read aloud. These young adults will soon to be graduating, as I soon will be retiring. Flanking both sides of me, two of them lay their heads on my shoulders. All of us recognize that we were nearing a grand shift in our lives, but choose to take a pause, here and now, together, from that uncertain future.

I look at their hands, pale white to velvet black, holding paperback copies of *To Kill A Mockingbird*, and listen as Amber reads, “Ladies bathed before noon, after their three o’clock naps, and by nightfall were like soft teacakes with frostings of sweat and sweet talcum.”

I watch as Marquise—a tough, solidly-built, black, young man—rises and walks to my desk. He takes my braid from off of it and returns to his seat in the circle. Resting his head on his

forearm, listening as Amber continues reading, he strokes the braid repeatedly, pokes his rough fingers through the soft, thick, interlacing strands. At this moment, I would not have been surprised if he started to suck his thumb or fell asleep.

Marquise, so filled with turmoil. Marquise, the source of complaints from the teachers in the faculty room: “He is so rude.” “With him graduating soon, too bad no one could have reached him.”

In this moment, I watch Marquise and see a trace of myself in his hands.