

I always knew something astronomically shitty would happen to me in Ms. K's classroom.

Of all the sophomore homerooms to be in at the tender hour of 7:30 AM, I think most people would prefer to be... not here. Not with her: the clog-wearing, composting, social-justice-warrior teacher who's always up all of our asses. *Remember: when you assume you make an ass out of U and ME.* I particularly hate that one. I'll assume all I want, thanks, Rebecca.

Yes, in fact, I *have* called her by her first name. She'd looked shocked, but then she laughed like an old witch. For some reason that pissed me off even more. And now it's like everything she does just irritates the shit outta me. For example, where I'm sitting currently: this woman puts our desks together in half-circles so we can face each other when we speak. Or when we're not speaking. I think she forgets that part. I don't want or need to watch Darian Prasad fall asleep with his eyes half-open.

You know, now that I'm on about it, let's talk about her entire classroom. She's put up these posters everywhere, of people who are supposed to inspire us. She talks about them and their accomplishments every now and then. (Which, like, that's great ma'am. Meanwhile I can barely get above a B- on your weird assignments. Makes me feel awesome to hear about how Ta-Nehisi Coates is changing the world through his writing, or whatever.) Her desk is directly across from the door, so she can watch all 36 of us as we trudge in every morning. Creepy. She also does this annoying thing where she refers to each of us by name -- I do not want to be perceived, thanks -- and gives us a nod or a handshake. Like... we get it, you're committed.

Oh! and you'll love this: on the first day of class, she made us do this "social contract". It basically means we created the classroom rules together, instead of just... I dunno, Ms. K coming up with them herself like the rest of the teachers in this place? And she hangs it -- it's a giant posterboard -- right above her desk, as if she prays to it every day. Please! Just take your paycheck and go home.

I know I sound bitter, and that's because I am. I'm tired of her constantly asking me to *consider joining an after-school group, Leyla or start writing in a journal, Leyla or Leyla, notice how your words affect other people.*

*Keep my name out of your fucking mouth, I want to scream at her, to call her out. You think you know what I need, but you don't. You don't know me.*

And now here we are.

Leyla Ramirez: broooooo  
Aniyah Johnson: what  
Leyla Ramirez: do u have a tampon  
Aniyah Johnson: sksksksk not like this..  
Leyla Ramirez: just tell me if u have one!!! no joke i think im free  
bleeding on the seat  
Aniyah Johnson: don't do Ms. K like that 🙄  
Leyla Ramirez: its not like its even her chairs. its LMHS property  
Leyla Ramirez: anyway do you?? i fuckin need one  
Aniyah Johnson: ya i got a pad  
Leyla Ramirez: ok le

“What’s up, Leyla?”

Fuck.

The class goes dead silent, the way they do when something’s about to go down. Ms. K only uses that voice, that I’m-trying-to-be-the-cool-mom voice, when she’s trying to make a point.

“Sorry,” I mumble, stuffing my phone away. Ms. K just looks at me and says nothing, which is even more infuriating, because this is literally the quietest I’ve ever heard this classroom be. I know they’re not saying anything -- not even breathing -- because they’re too busy watching me suffer. *Fuck y’all, then.*

Ms. K sighs, like she’s talking to a toddler. “Okay, social contract.”

*What?* “What?”

“Give me your phone. You know this.”

“I promise I’m done, that was the last -- ”

“Leyla, come on.” She says this like she’s pleading with her annoying younger sister and not her student. *You don’t know me like that*, I think. I can feel my face curling into a scowl and I *know* it’s messing up my lashes.

But I’ve already been suspended once. It was just an in-school, but my dad will probably disown me if I get another one and get expelled. You know how normally it’s “three strikes and you’re out”? Well, our iconic Las Montañas High School has a two-strike policy. Fuck up, fuck up, get fucked. That’s how the whole system is.

So I inhale, count to five, *slowly*, and breathe out the bad shit. The anger feels like my ribcage is filled with tiny metal balls and they're hitting everything, making my chest vibrate. But I saw this on Instagram the other week and it helps a little, like slowing down the vibrations. It makes me less likely to explode, at least.

I look Rebecca directly in the eyes, and she looks straight back at me.

I take my phone out of my pocket and hand it to her.

And then she *looks* at it. I swear to God. She checks my messages.

I'm literally too shocked to even say anything. Her eyes linger on the screen, so I know she saw what Niy texted me. But then, a second later, she locks eyes with me, and she *winks*. It was so small and subtle that I thought I made it up, but I didn't. Did I? Did my teacher just --

"Alright guys. It's been a hell of a week," Ms. K starts. She makes her way back to her desk and sets my phone there, face-down. I'm watching her like a hawk, so I can see now that her desk is packed with nearly a dozen piles of papers and binders and manila folders and sticky-notes. And like, sure, they're neat piles, but it's like the way you stuff shit into the closet to not clean it or deal with it. It's like she's barely keeping them in check. I'd never noticed.

But this is irrelevant. I need to get to Niy. I've never bled through during class and I'm not about to, thanks.

Ms. K goes on. "I know you see me every morning, and usually we have business to take care of. I stand by that." *Where is she going with this?* "But it's Wednesday, and sometimes we need to switch it up to stay sharp." Ms. K starts erasing her agenda for the day, which she usually puts on the right-most side of the whiteboard. She does that so we can see it as soon as we step foot in her classroom.

Then, she swivels around on the heel of her clogs. "Let's play a game."

The class lets out at a collective sigh of relief, as if they've been studying all day and it isn't 8 in the morning. I'm tired, too, but I don't buy it.

"Ms. K, let's do Jackbox!!" Lonnie Barker yells.

Then, Darian, who's suddenly awake and alert: "I'd be down for pictionary."

“Actually, I want us to play a game you guys probably haven’t played since middle school,” Ms. K looks around dramatically, for effect. I roll my eyes. “We’re gonna play heads-up seven-up. Remember that one?”

Surprisingly, only a few minor groans. It is a childish game, but most people seem alright with it. I think they just want to use this as an excuse to go back to sleep.

Normally I would too, but every time I move around in my seat I can feel how wet my underwear is. *This is fucking bad.* At the very least I’m wearing black pants; the bloodstain won’t show that bad. I can clean it, or dry it, anyway, if I can just --

“So you all remember how to play? Let me just add one rule as we begin: I’m going to pick the first four people to be ‘choosers’. And it’ll be blind. Meaning, all of you are going to start with your heads down, thumbs up.” She looks around at us expectantly. “Alright? Let’s do this! Heads down, people.”

I cross my arms over my desk. It’s not big enough to hold both of my arms, but if I squeeze them forward I can kind of make them fit. But I’m *not* closing my eyes. I want so badly to look back at Aniyah so she can save me somehow. I really need that pad. At this point, I think I’ll just stay here, in this seat, for the rest of the day. Or the rest of my life.

“Hmmm... who wants to go first? I’m rewarding the people who actually wrote something on their exit ticket yesterday.” The class giggles sheepishly. We do exit tickets every single day, at the end of class. I know I turned in a blank one. I don’t even remember what we talked about yesterday; that was six classes ago.

*Fuck it.* I have to make eye contact with Niy. I’m in the process of turning my neck behind me, as smoothly as I can, when --

She’s standing right next to me. Hovering, really, like she does. Of course! Like I said: I always knew it would be this classroom.

Ms. K looks at me, and I look at her, and I’m not going to break eye contact. *Why you so obsessed with me, Rebecca? It’s not like you’re my mom. You’ll never be.*

This woman, the bane of my existence, smiles and holds up a finger to her mouth, and she hands me a gigantic pad. Like, a maxi-pad. And then she walks away. The strangest thing is that her shoes are usually so loud, but now she’s moving so silently I think she must be using witchcraft or something. Or at least... she’s trying really hard. When she has crossed the

classroom, Ms. K says loudly, “Keep those eyes shut! I’ve only picked one person so far. If you cheat, it won’t be you.”

She looks at me again, then jerks her head in the direction of the door. Her eyes are so wide and her neck is so scrawny that you can see her veins bursting out. She looks like an absolute *clown*.

Something about it makes me want to cry. It takes me a few seconds to hold back the gross feeling in my stomach. I honestly have to stop looking at Ms. K because I feel so weird about it. It’s like those tiny metal balls are sinking down into my intestines, and then dissolving into air, and it wants to escape. I know if I let it out, something bad will happen, like I’ll start sobbing. So I shut it down.

I stand up, a little too quickly. As expected, my insides flow right outta me. *Eeeuuuugh*. I shove the pad into the pocket of my hoodie and, in the most chill way, I walk past everyone toward the door. *I cannot believe this is happening to me right now*. My eyes are trained on the exit like it’s the only thing I can see.

Just as I’m about to open the door, Ms. K touches my shoulder and mouths something to me, something so soft and guarded that I don’t fully comprehend it until I’m in the bathroom: “Don’t worry about the seat, I’ll clean it.”

I don’t know why I’m even writing this all down. Everything ended up being totally fine. I came back a few minutes later and people didn’t even question it; I’d just gone to the bathroom, no biggie. No one had even glanced at my seat (which was cleaner than it had ever been). While I was dealing with my own personal mess, everyone was sitting at their desks. Heads down, thumbs up, waiting and waiting to get picked by somebody.