1622 words **House fire**

There's a little girl in my Grade 2 class this year – Lonika. She must be seven years old. She has permanent braids tight along her head and beads to finish off each braid. She is black black black. I think her parents are from Africa. They have that kind of accent, maybe. The boys in the class like Lonika. She is particularly close with Jake. Jake's mum is Ashkenazic, his dad is Sephardic. This is fascinating to me: two Jewish traditions in one family! This is not fascinating to my students; to them, these are arbitrary distinctions. Big deal?

During lessons, I'm up in front of the class at the chalkboard, trying to put on a good show, the kids are sitting in their designated spots on clearly laid-out taped lines on the carpet, and Lonika is rolling around. Other times she gets up, goes to her cubbie and pulls out her water bottle, leisurely drinks from it, and glances at my lesson from time to time. All while I'm trying to explain that, in French, nouns are feminine and masculine. The students think that is fascinating, but mostly just plain weird; Lonika, by the way, does not.

When the kids are at their seats, practising the principles I just taught at the board, Lonika finishes quickly. She comes over to me and complains that she's done already. I furrow my brow and say sternly, “Let me see your work.” She goes back to her desk and returns with her work. She shows me. All the answers are correct and written in a handwriting more beautiful than I could do, trying my hardest. She gets it, you see. She doesn’t struggle with anything I'm trying to teach this Grade 2 class.

During Self-Selected Reading, she reads with the boys: sports almanacs, superhero comics, astronomy books. The boys usually get more Self-Selected Reading Time because they finish their written assignments quickly. The boys tend to scribble, writing carelessly on the lines provided. The girls are perfectionists, so they take all day to finish one simple thing, their assigned sentences (two sentences) accompanied by elaborate princess and kitty cat drawings in full colour and detail.

Lonika has a rude way of interrupting, of answering questions without raising her hand. I punish her each time by showing her my displeasure. I must discipline her. But then, at

home, in the school night evening, ravenous, eating dinner, I think, 'So what? Lonika's got stuff to say. Let her talk. Let her talk without raising her hand, without me saying: *Yes, Lonika, you may speak now.'*

Then, back in the classroom the next day, I forget my resolution, and I punish her again for speaking out without raising her hand. Like my students, I forget to be good.

Monday morning, I'm a little bit late going out to the playground to pick up my class for the day. The kids are in line, sort of, chatting and pushing, teasing and talking. One little Asian girl – Lilly – she always has a story; she can't help herself: she's driven to say something unanswerable. (I punish her for that too, with my stern looks, my show of displeasure.)

Lilly says, “Miss! Miss! Lonika's house burned down over the weekend! Well, it's not a house, it's an apartment building, and the fire was so big that everybody living there is in hotels now!”

Lilly looks deep into my face and waits for my reaction. I look beyond her, pretending to think. Seeing no immediate response from me, Lilly hangs her head and looks down at the ground for dramatic effect (there is nothing there).

I look from Lilly to Lonika, who is three or four students from the front of the line-up. She is wearing her knapsack flopping off her shoulders, playing rock-paper-scissors with Jake, and she is laughing because she keeps winning, though there's no strategy. I'm thinking, 'Wow. Would a kid be at school bright and early Monday morning if her place just burned to the ground?'

This news is important because a) there was a fire; b) we know someone who is directly affected by the fire; c) there is some exciting relocation going on, a little camping-out; and d) the story is about an apartment building. This last item is noteworthy, because the families in this neighbourhood all live in single-family houses. Only some of the bussed-in kids live in apartment buildings. People who live in apartment buildings are automatically poor and should be pitied. Lonika, as it turns out, is one of the bussed-in kids, and is by definition, not part of the tightly-knit neighbourhood of house-living families whose kids all go to our school.

So this is a triple-whammy for Lonika: she is an outsider as a bussed-in kid, she is already pitied for living in an apartment, and now she has lost her lousy apartment. (But a few moments after the first bell Monday morning, the kids have just learned that, really, an apartment is better than nothing.) She is also a visible minority – she is black black black, as I said – but nobody says this out loud, because in these politically correct days, it is practically illegal to mention it.

I look back to Lilly, who is still dying to get a reaction out of me, and I say something like: "Oh, my my! *That* is terrible! That *is* terrible! That is *just* terrible! Oh, my ..." Then I wave to the other nineteen kids and say, "Okay! Time to come in! Let's go!" and I lead them through the double doors, into the school corridor, to start our week together.

Well, I am walking down the corridor, it's the first recess of the day, and the principal pokes her head out to call me in to her office.

"E*liz*abeth! You *must* know already! One of your students – Lonika – Lonika's house burned down over the weekend! Well, it's not a house, it's an apartment building, and the fire was so big that everybody living there is in hotels now!"

I catch my breath and the principal keeps talking. "Okay," says the principal, crossing her legs the other way. She has already figured everything out.

"We'll give her lunches. We have ladies, we have parents lined up to make her lunches, and we have donations: clothes, non-perishable foods and toys and school supplies and everything this little girl would need."

I know that the whole fire story is true because in a crisis like this, people feel a sudden need to be useful, so they go out and buy stuff that they know the kid doesn't really need, like school supplies. (The board has always provided school supplies for every kid from Kindergarten to Grade 8.) But Lonika'll take those pencils and erasers, because then it'll feel like a luxury.

The apartment building fire story is all over the news all week: first-person accounts, keeping track of families and interviewing them so the public readership can know what having a fire feels like and what it's like to lose everything. I feel proud of her: yes, she's

one of my little girls. From Room 10. That's my class. *She's so brave*.

And all week I've been watching this little girl; I keep an eye on her, to get a sense of where she's at, a little protective, how she's feeling, what she could be going through.

And you know what? If no one had told me this little girl's world just burned down, if no one had told me this little girl just lost everything, I would've never known it. She still rolls around on the carpet. She still gets up in the middle of lessons and drinks from her water bottle. (She has a new water bottle, by the way; it is very shiny, and I think she's quite proud of it.) And she reads those Spiderman comics with Jake and she still gives me the whole same old, "Miss, I'm done my work" three minutes after I've assigned it. She is even on top of the ten weekly spelling test words. This little girl hasn't skipped a beat.

Today, I was writing out a list of verbs on chart paper and she finally comes up to me in a private moment, and I can see that she's in some kind of distress. "Miss, Miss," she says. She shows me a paper cut just under her thumbnail. Her eyes are watery and puffy. Her bottom lip is quivering.

Now, teachers are supposed to be extra-vigilant and take every students' little wound seriously (for liability reasons, so the board doesn't get sued) and send them to the school office for ice or bandages; though often, I must confess, I look at the injury, brush the student off and say, "You're okay. Get back to work."

But I bend down and lay a hand on her arm."Oh, oh," I say, and scrunch up my face next to hers. "Oh, you go to the office for that, honey. You go to the office and get yourself a band-aid." She thinks about this for a moment, then shrugs her shoulders. "Okay," she says.

Lonika goes to the office and and brings back a band-aid and gives it to me and I peel off the plastic for her and place it carefully on her little black finger. then it'll have served its purpose: a little attention from a grown-up. A band-aid is a little acknowledgement of pain. And for a moment, that's what Lonika wants; that's what kids want: they just want a little acknowledgement. And then they go off skipping, like this little Lonika, and they're okay.