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Staffroom confidential

Facing the pack

Cassandra Atherton

AT thirty-two I ran away from school. I left in the middle of second term. Severed all ties. Took my books and my Barbie pencil caddy. Rolled up my laminated Buffy posters and walked out. Before the bell. Before the day was over. Before I could change my mind. I never looked back. Until now.

It took me nine years to leave. It took me nine years to walk out of the gates one last time. Nine years. And yet, it didn't take me long to realise what it was that I left behind in those classrooms.

Someone should invent a group called 'Teachers Anonymous', where teachers can gather to discuss every dream they've had about strangling those Year 8 students who drew nasty caricatures of them. Every fantasy about back-chatting the teenager who has called them 'fat' or 'cow' or 'bitch'. I have my top five students: the top five who still haunt me. Every teacher has them. Every teacher secretly plots their demise.

This is about being overworked and underpaid. It's about lying to people at parties and telling them I am anything but a teacher to avoid the stigma. Those who can, do. Those who can't, teach. Those who can, escape. Those who can't, become jaded and embittered. This is dedicated to teachers everywhere who are sick of hearing how lucky they are to have holidays. How lucky they are to finish at 3.30 pm. *How lucky they are.* And finally, to answer the question I am asked the most by students: yes, we do talk about you in the staffroom. All the time. In fact, we bitch about you constantly.

I HAVE HAD a lot of first days at school. First day of prep, in my new pinafore and long summer dress, shiny innocence beaming from the photo in my granny's brag book. First day of high school, with pimples and braces, this time in a maroon pinafore and a jumper. I didn't want anyone to see my developing breasts. And, finally, my first day as a teacher; pink suit, new briefcase. I didn't want anyone to smell my fear.

The thing I remember most about those early days is the smell of stale sweat in the classrooms. There is nothing kinky or sexy about teenage male sweat. It's like sniffing the inside of a sock after it has been worn for a week and has gone stiff and is soiled in the toe crescent. Proust had his madeleine; I have teenage male sweat. Occasionally when a schoolboy stands next to me on public transport I am transported back to the late 1990s; rows of boys with their shirts hanging out, ties askew, legs too big to fit under their desks. And me in my pink suit, standing up the front of the classroom with *Lord of the Flies* and a blue whiteboard marker. Wondering how I was going to write on the board without turning my back on them. The pack of smelly boys, smelling my fear over their body odour, waiting to tear me apart.

I GOT INTO teaching when I was twenty-three, because I come from a family of teachers. If you ask most teachers you will find a family connection somewhere along the line. A mother. A father. An aunty. *Someone*. Teachers breed teachers.

As a little girl I would pretend to correct my imaginary students' homework and call the roll. Who knew that, fifteen years later, I would never bother calling the roll and students' homework would become the bane of my life. I got into teaching because I didn't really know what other jobs entailed. I got into teaching because I was told that no one could make a living as a writer. So, while I was writing my Masters on Nabokov's *Lolita*, I enrolled in a graduate diploma in secondary teaching. I went on to get my PhD in Literature. My grandparents still brag about my teaching diploma more than my doctorate. But that is because teaching used to be a respectable profession. Or so I am told.

Now, at parties and social gatherings I avoid telling anyone I am a teacher. It just provokes one of three possible responses:

'Did you get a crap mark in the VCE and couldn't get into anything else?'

'But the wages are so low in teaching, how can you bear it?'

'You must love all the holidays, you slacker!'

It's not worth getting riled up about, but just for the record: I got 98.75 in the VCE. I was always pretty happy with the wages; I was making about \$75,000 per annum, more than you make as an associate lecturer at university. And the holidays do not nearly make up for the stress, being sworn and spat at (by parents as well as students), the Saturday school sport, the school camps and marking every night of the week.

NONE OF MY teacher training prepared me for the classroom. Instead of lectures about pedagogy and scaffolding and butcher's paper filled with crayon flowcharts, someone should have told me what to say when you tell a student to stop talking and he says 'make me'.

I was offered a job at an all-boys middle school on my third and final teaching round. I'd just been made redundant from my job as an archivist so it didn't seem prudent to turn it down. Opportunity had knocked. I mean, how bad could it be? My teaching rounds had been relatively uneventful and both my supervisors had given me top marks for my teaching ability.

I still remember being offended that one of my supervisors, unable to come up with any real criticism of me, had written on my report that I should modulate my voice more in the classroom. Monotony is teaching rounds, not my voice. Monotony is handing your supervisor detailed lesson plans that you will never write again once you are a 'real' teacher. Monotony is teaching your supervisor's classes all day, every day without pay, while she sits at the back of the class surfing the web. Monotony is mountains of your supervisor's correction that needs to be marked before the next morning, on top of the new lesson plans that must be composed and submitted to her. And she won't read them. In general, teachers don't read any more than their students. In fact, some of them read less. Teachers can't talk about books if they have never read any. So most teachers can't talk about books. Unless they have been teaching the same one for a decade. Teachers can only talk about students, particularly the ones they hate. Monotony is teaching rounds. Round and round. Chasing my tail.

I'M WALKING ACROSS the quadrangle in my little pink suit, with my brand-spanking-new briefcase, in a brand-new workplace. My first day as Miss Atherton. I've never been called that before. And the pack has spotted me. The new teacher. The pink one. Their prey.

One of my friends refers to Limeley Grammar School as Stalag 17. The boys are like menacing prisoners surrounded by concrete. Big concrete steps framing the bitumen. Grey on grey. *Four grey walls, and four grey towers*. I am the Lady of Shalott. Doomed. Just give me a paintbrush and a boat and I will write my name around the prow and float down the Maribyrnong River.

I am trying not to listen to the spanking sound my heels make as I cross the quadrangle.

'Hey Miss, will *you* teach *me*?' some of the boys yell out in a seemingly amicable tone. But they are the same ones who try to make me cry later that week. They tell me later they have managed to make the last four female teachers cry. Two of those teachers have left. The other two now get 'hand-picked' classes to avoid problems. I keep walking.

THE FIRST DAY, often the first week, at a new school is called 'the honeymoon period'. The boys at Limeley spend four days summing me up. They are quiet in class. They are reasonably polite and they at least pretend to copy down the notes I put on the board. They don't do their homework so I keep them in at lunchtime. In

fact, I have to keep in at least three or four boys every lunchtime. Every lunchtime for a year, I sit in a classroom with 'naughty boys'. I don't get to eat my lunch. I'm not allowed to eat in the classroom.

These lunchtimes account for around two hundred hours of supervision. And I know that if I don't put in two hundred hours this year, then the year after and the year after that will mount up. Hundreds and thousands of hours before me. And soon I will be keeping boys in at lunchtime for years. Decades. Maybe even a millennium.

'David, you will have to finish that drink before you come into the classroom or throw it away,' I said.

'But I just bought it, Miss, chill.' He took a swig out of the bottle and swaggered into the room. All eyes were on me. What was I going to do?

'David, give me the drink or throw it away.'

'I'm not throwing it away, I told you, I just bought it and I'm thirsty. It's...' He paused, looking me up and down, '...hot in here.' A few of the boys reacted to his comment with stupid noises. Boys are good at making stupid noises.

'David, give me the drink or leave. Just remember that if you don't attend this lunchtime detention you will get an afterschool detention. Your choice.'

David slammed the drink down on the desk and sat down in the back row.

'Thank you,' I said sarcastically, 'now get on with your work. If you don't finish it this lunchtime, then I will have the pleasure of all of your company on Monday.'

That was the problem with trying to discipline on Fridays. Boys didn't think that far ahead. If they misbehaved after Friday lunchtime, the only punishment you could give was for Monday. And to them that seemed a whole lifetime away. For me, it was a few piles of correction and lesson preparation. The weekends flew when I was a teacher.

When the bell rang, the boys left and David snatched his bottle of Coke from my desk. I let it go. There's only so much you can do in one day. When the last bell rang I completed my bus duty. This involved standing out the front of the school where the buses depart, for around half an hour, and checking uniform. Are the boys wearing their blazers? Are their shirts tucked in? Are their ties done up appropriately? Do they look respectable? Can I push any of them under a speeding bus? Bus duty was also, I later found out, meant to get the boys to behave for the bus drivers before they left the school grounds. More than once, a bus had returned to the school, the bus driver complaining that he would not drive rude, abusive boys who swung off the rafters..

Bus duty is the last thing you want to do at the end of a school day. And the new teachers always seemed to get Fridays. On my first Friday of teaching I struggled out to my car after bus duty under a tower of books. I reached for the door handle

and realised how sticky my car was. Fortunately, I only drove an old Mazda 121. It was now tinted a light brown and was sticky all over the roof and driver's door. It was Coca-Cola. David stood with his friends at the other end of the car park.

'Hello, Miss,' he called out to me, 'have a nice weekend...washing your car.'

There was no use reporting it. There's no use reporting any incident, really. Nothing happens. You can't prove it. You're expected to grin and bear it. But don't smile until Easter. Don't tell them this is your first teaching position. Don't let them see you cry. Instead, I just got angry. It's a very useful involuntary response.

That first weekend I went home and cried. Cried when I looked at the hours of marking and preparation that had to be done. Cried at the thought of having to go back into the classroom. Cried at how vulnerable and alone I felt. Cried at how far away payday was. I think now that crying is the first stage. Like the five stages of grief. But there are only two stages in teaching. Crying and drinking. Crying gives way to drinking. Usually wine. Definitely chardonnay. I like to think of myself as more academic: I drink red wine, specifically shiraz.

I know that a lot of teachers I have worked with drink too much. I don't judge them. In my first years of teaching I drank myself into oblivion on Friday nights. I had to mark all day Saturday and Sunday so there was little time for drinking then. Friday night was my night. Until I was told that I had to supervise swimming training.

IN THE SECOND week of teaching the sports mistress cornered me.

'Sport?' she said.

'No, thanks,' I answered naively, like I was being asked if I wanted fries with that.

'No, what is your sport?' she asked, clipboard in hand, dragging a bag of balls behind her.

'Well, I played netball at school,' I told her.

'No, sorry.'

'Sorry?'

'Sorry, netball is full,' she said and stared at me.

'That's okay,' I answered, 'maybe next time.'

'Miss Atherton, I'm not sure if the principal made this clear to you, but every teacher is required to supervise one sport during the year. Your choice is soccer, cricket, swimming or athletics.'

The sports mistress was stereotypically devoid of femininity. I stared back at her blankly as I stood there in my pink stilettos and white Bettina Liano dress. She didn't wear make-up. Or any shoe that didn't have laces. She reminded me of the

headmistress at St Trinian's. She reminded me of every PE teacher who tortured me at school. When I didn't answer straightaway I was afraid she would ask me to drop and give her fifty push-ups, right there in the quadrangle.

'So what will it be?'

'Well, swimming, I guess.'

'Right, well, there is a meeting tomorrow at lunchtime to hand out the stopwatches and the swimming schedule. You will be required to supervise training on Wednesday nights and swim meets on Friday nights,' she said, writing my name in her clipboard.

'I'm sorry, but I can't make it to the meeting tomorrow, I'm keeping in boys who haven't done their homework.'

'The meeting is compulsory, you will have to keep the boys in at recess,' she said. 'Don't be late.'

I WAS LEARNING to live on M&Ms and Snakes.

Teachers often have lolly jars in their rooms and they aren't for the sobbing students who are having friendship problems – they're there because most teachers don't get time to eat. Handfuls of M&Ms and snakes could be eaten quickly on the way to class, surreptitiously between one bell and the next.

It's degrading to have your life defined by bells. *For whom the bell tolls / It tolls for thee.* Me. I felt like Pavlov's dog. Get to class! Attend the meeting! Surrender your life, year by year, wrinkle by wrinkle!

The sports meeting at lunchtime confirmed my worst fears. I had to catch the bus to the pool with the students after school every Wednesday. I had to supervise their swimming training for an hour and a half. I had to wait for them all to be picked up and then I had to find some way to get back to the school and pick up my car. I would have to walk or catch a cab. Every Friday night I had to travel for two hours to the swim meet on a bus of shrieking students and time each of Limeley's swimmers at the swim meet. I would rarely finish before 8.30 pm. Limeley had just stolen my Friday nights. There would be only just enough time left to drink myself into oblivion when I got home.

'This is a long season,' said the sports mistress. 'It could be twenty weeks or more, culminating in two key events: the AGSV and the APS swimming carnivals.' They were on Tuesday and Thursday nights and they finished at about 11 pm at the Melbourne Sports and Aquatic Centre and we were required to be at school at 8 am the next morning, ready and raring to go.

At twenty-three years of age I realised that I no longer had a life. I lived and breathed school. I was Limeley. Just as Cathy was Heathcliff and Lennon was the walrus.

ON WEDNESDAY EVENING I waited at the pool for the parents to collect their children. I had a headache. I'd had a 'five on day', which meant that I had taught five out of six classes back to back with no break. I had recess duty and my usual lunchtime homework detention. In my free period I packed my bags and got ready to leave on the swimming bus. At 5.45 pm three students were left. Their parents were almost an hour late. I gave the boys the school's mobile phone and ask them to ring their parents.

'My mum isn't answering,' said the first student.

'My mum says she's on her way,' said the second student.

'My mum says she's just finishing the shopping and will be here as soon as she can,' said the third.

'You guys do realise that swimming training finished at 5, don't you? I mean, you told your parents to pick you up at 5, didn't you?' I asked.

'Yes, but my mum is always late,' said the first student.

'My mum has a very important job and says she isn't always able to get away on time,' said the second student.

'My mum says that you're paid to wait with us and it's your job,' said the third.

I tried not to blame the students. I tried not to show how annoyed I was. I tried to focus my anger on the parent, not the child.

'Actually, I'm not paid to wait around,' I said. 'I never liked babysitting and I don't want to start it at twenty-three. You need to be picked up on time. I have work to do. Make sure it doesn't happen again.'

'Sorry, Miss,' they all chimed in. 'Miss' is one of those generic terms the students use for all female staff. They aren't interested enough to bother learning your name. And yet, it seemed unfair that I had to learn the names of three hundred students each year who got offended if you ever got their name wrong. I should call them all 'boy'.

Mother Two showed up at 6 pm. 'Thanks for waiting with him, you don't have to wait in the future. I can't always get away from work on time,' she said, winding down the window on her Mercedes.

'Actually, I legally have to wait for all the students to be picked up.'

She wound up her window with no response.

Mother One showed up at 6.15 and said, 'I guess this is the downside of the job, the waiting around.' She laughed.

'Not the only downside. Swimming training finishes at 5 pm, I'd appreciate you picking up Luke on time next week.'

'Oh, I can't promise that,' she said and drove off. Before she shut the boot, I heard her say, 'The nerve of that teacher. She's paid to stand there. I don't rush for anyone, least of all one of your teachers.'

Mother Three was an hour and a half late. She parked across the road and beeped the horn. James ran across the road and they sped off. It was 7 pm by the time I got back to my car.

There was no use complaining about it. There was no use complaining about anything. Nothing happened anyway. Nothing changed.

'MISS, CAN YOU tell the bus driver to turn up the radio?'

It was Friday afternoon on the bus to Geelong for a swim meet. The bus driver was my only ally. He was a really nice guy who thought it was stiff that I had to give up my Friday nights to time students as they swam up and down the pool. He turned up the radio marginally and winked at me. The students tested every ringtone on their phones and then some of them started to snigger.

'Hey Miss, what's the Kama Sutra?'

'It's a book of sex positions,' I said calmly. It was far better to be direct. The boys were shocked. They were so used to being fobbed off that they could barely believe I had even said the word 'sex'.

'Can you recommend any specific positions?' one brave boy ventured from the back of the bus.

'None that you'd know,' I said as the boys yelled 'Shot down!' They started to sing along to the radio and left me alone, until three boys decided to moon at cars out the back window of the bus.

'James, Chris and Simon, get up here now.'

They thought they were heroes as they strutted down the aisle. The rest of the boys cheered. I needed to come up with a comment that would deflate their egos and discourage the other forty boys from doing the same.

'You know *that* is an afterschool detention.'

They didn't care. They were basking in their own glory.

'And,' I added, 'a word of advice: if you're going to do that, I'd wax if I was you.' I knew it was the wrong thing to say. I knew it could scar them for life. I knew one of them would probably rack up hours on a psychiatrist's couch. But that was only fair. Teaching scarred me for life. And anyway, if they put it out there in public, I think they should expect it to be commented upon.

The rest of the boys cheered and the remainder of the trip was noisy but uneventful.

Cassandra Atherton used to be a secondary school teacher. She is now a Lecturer in Literary Studies and Creative Writing and was awarded the 2011 Deakin University Teacher of the Year Award. This excerpt is taken from her forthcoming memoir. She has published a book of literary criticism, *Flashing Eyes and Floating Hair: A Study of Gwen Harwood's Pseudonymous Poetry* (Australian Scholarly Press, 2007), a book of poetry, *After Lolita* (Ahadada Press, 2010), and a novel, *The Man Jar* (Printed Matter Press, 2010). She is currently working on a book, 'Wise Guys', about American public intellectuals, based on her interviews with Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn, Harold Bloom, Camille Paglia, Stephen Greenblatt and many more.