

Alternative Education

Paola Soto Hornbuckle

Seriocomic

ELLIE: 13 to 15

ROBERT: 13 to 15

EVAN: 13 to 15

HANNAH: 13 to 15

Four teenagers are working on a project after school in an empty classroom. They are struggling students in Alternative Education. ELLIE is the best student and is trying to organize them. She is holding a paper.

ELLIE: All right, let's focus on our project! So . . . in Henry David Thoreau's *On Walden Pond*, we learned that Thoreau lived alone in a cottage in the woods for two whole years. Just to learn about himself. Even though he was a Harvard graduate, friends with Emerson and Hawthorne, and everyone thought he would succeed . . . he didn't. At least not at first. He quit his teaching job after two weeks and went to Walden Pond to be at one with nature. To learn about the trees, the stars . . . and how to grow beans. He really liked beans. He said, "If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a

different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away." Mr. Von Seggern wants us each to write a paragraph about Thoreau's ideas. Any thoughts?

ROBERT: Thoreau sucks!

ELLIE: Robert, that attitude is not going to help us get an A.

ROBERT: So?

EVAN: Yeah . . . Thoreau sucks! He's boring! Do you think he ever got a girl to go out on a date with him?

ELLIE: Probably not. That's why he went to Walden Pond and hung out with the beans . . . but really? Hearing your own drummer? Being a nonconformist . . . you guys don't relate to that? I kind of see where he is going with this. It's about being true to yourself.

HANNAH: Robert made me spill my nail polish, and now my nails are ruined!

ELLIE: Hannah, Mr. Von Seggern is nice enough to let us use his room after school and if you ruin his desks we're all going to get in big trouble.

HANNAH: Like I care.

EVAN: Put it away Hannah, or Mr. Von Seggern is going to call your mother.

HANNAH: My mother is in Kansas taking care of my grandma. She just got out of rehab. I haven't seen her for a month. I'm actually staying over at Sushi's house.

ELLIE: Sushi? She hasn't been in class in weeks. I thought she ran away. What's she been up to?

HANNAH: She's kind of down. Really depressed.

ELLIE: What happened?

HANNAH: Well, her mother tried to kill her father, because she caught him cheating with another woman . . . and she shot him.

ROBERT: BANG! Yeah, she blasted his head off . . . !!

EVAN: He's missing an ear now. It's so sick! Just has a hole that oozes blood and some watery liquid.

HANNAH: Yeah, he survived, but he's like in and out of the hospital and like now her mother is in jail . . . but her brother Mike is taking care of her . . . and I'm staying with them.

ELLIE: Mike? I thought Mike was schizophrenic. He was hearing voices all semester.

ROBERT: Yeah, but they let him out of the institution for good behavior. He hasn't set a cat on fire in over a year.

EVAN: Mike's cool, man. Me and him, we're tight.

ELLIE: That's too bad. Sushi is going to fail the class. I definitely don't want to fail. I want to get an A.

HANNAH: Like she cares.

ROBERT: I'm bored! I want to leave . . . let's go to the 7-Eleven.

ELLIE: No! We need to start on our paragraphs.

[*ELLIE taps ROBERT on the shoulder.*]

ROBERT: You touched me! That's sexual harassment.

EVAN: Ohhhhh, she touched him . . . woowoowoo! I'm telling Mr. Von Seggern.

HANNAH: Shut up already!

ELLIE: Yes . . . good idea. Let's get to work. Let's get out a pencil and paper and talk about the assignment.

ROBERT: I don't have paper.

[*ELLIE hands him a piece of paper.*]

EVAN: I left my pencil at my dad's girlfriend's uncle's house.

[*ELLIE hands him a pencil.*]

HANNAH: I forgot my book.

[*ELLIE hands HANNAH an extra book lying around the classroom.*]

ELLIE: Mr. Von Seggern wants us to write a paragraph. One paragraph. Just one . . . about a place in nature where we like to go to get away and think. Describe it and explain how you feel being there. Why it is so special.

EVAN, HANNAH, ROBERT: He wants us to write a whole paragraph???????

ELLIE: Yes, about a place in nature. Anywhere. The beach, your backyard, a park . . . where we go to think. Tell him why we like it.

EVAN: That's too much work!

ROBERT: No way we are getting that done by tomorrow!

HANNAH: My hands are tired!

ELLIE: Then I guess I won't be in your group anymore. I quit.

[*ELLIE starts to leave.*]

HANNAH: You can't do that. We need you, Ellie. [*HANNAH goes over and hugs ELLIE.*] You've always been there for me. Every time I ran away I knew I could call you and you would listen to me, meet me at the bus stop, and take me home to wherever I was staying that week!

ROBERT: You really care about people!

EVAN: Remember that time when my cousin got shot and killed? You gave me a lollipop and told me not to cry because I still had four more cousins left.

ELLIE: Yes . . . we sure had good times together. All right, I'll stay on the condition that you write that paragraph . . . **RIGHT NOW.**

HANNAH: Yeah . . . sure . . . of course . . . we can do that.

[*They sit and write it quickly.*]

EVAN: Here's mine. The Tree, by Evan. "When I go out to my backyard, I sit by the tree where my cat is buried. The cat that was killed by Sushi's brother. His name was Toby. I think of Toby and lean against the tree. The tree is a place of rest. The tree is Toby's headstone. It reminds me that life can be over at any minute."

ELLIE: Good job, Evan.

HANNAH: I'm done. The Beach, by Hannah. "I like the beach. It's amazing. I like to make out there with my boyfriend. Maybe that is not so hot. But, when I listen to the waves, I kind of like, feel very good inside. Like I don't have any problems. There is meaning to everything."

ELLIE: Nice. Thoreau would be proud.

ROBERT: You gotta hear mine! Nature Sucks! by Robert. "Nature sucks. I hate it. I hate leaves and trees. I hate to pick up dog crap in my yard. But I like rocks. I can throw them at people. I wish I was a rock, so I wouldn't have to feel any pain."

ELLIE: Wow Robert . . . you wrote more than one sentence. I'm impressed.

ROBERT: We rock, Ellie! Don't we?

ELLIE: Yes, we definitely do. Well, it seems we're set for tomorrow. Give me your papers so you don't lose them.

[They all go and bug her and give her the papers.]

ROBERT: Wait a minute. What about yours?

HANNAH: Yeah.

EVAN: Yeah.

ELLIE: *[Reading her paper.]* I Go to Nature, by Ellie. "I sit in the woods and think of all the creatures in this world big and small. The strong and the weak, the straight and the twisted, the beautiful and the cursed . . . and know they all need nurturance and love, shelter from the elements, nutrients to feed on, a sky to gaze upon, and if injured, a second chance. I see a baby bird that has fallen from its nest. With a leaf I place drops of water in its beak. It feels good to be a small part of that second chance."

[Beat.]

ALL: We're getting an A for sure!

[They all high-five.]